THE VICTORIAN SOCIAL SCENE IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE MEREDITH

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Ph. B. University of Chicago, 1921.

Submitted to the Department of

ENGLISH and

the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

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May 31, 1932

DEDICATION.

To my small son for whose sake
I have undertaken to see more of the
real significance of life by catch-
ing the vision of great writers.

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PREFACE.

My reading reveals that the most fascinating realm common to the literature of knowledge and the literature of power is that of social history. Truth and fiction meet here in a strange and entertaining manner. Show me the social background created by any author who lays the slightest claim to the classification, realist, and I shall find it not less interesting than his characters and his incidents.

The subtlety with which Meredith weaves this background and the progressive, almost prophetic quality of his ideas have led critics to say that he has no realistic social background, or that he made a complete escape from the so-called Victorianism which was the social order of his day. The problem of discovering how true were these criticisms led me into an analysis of the social background of his novels, and I have found it a problem worthy of interested study.

The final enjoyable experience connected with the setting down of my conclusions concerning the problem, is the acknowledgment of the assistance which I have received. I am indebted to Dr. J. H. Nelson for direction in the choice of a topic and for guidance in the arrangement and composition of the thesis. To Professor R. D. O'Leary I am also thankful for several invaluable suggestions.

Of the members of the Watson Library staff, Misses Fay Moys and Delma Kagi have been particularly interested and helpful.

To all these I offer my sincerest thanks.

MARY LINK TURNER.

CHAPTER ONE.

INTRODUCTORY.

The world upon which George Meredith opened his eyes in 1828 was a world not fully liberated from the eighteenth century social order. There remained in the life and thought of England the calm, casual and unhurried manner, the gentility, and the rationalism characteristic of the preceding century.

In the early years of Meredith's life, the forces which had animated the French Revolution lay in apparent abeyance. The forces which had effected the Industrial Revolution -- most notably the new machinery with which England had conquered Napoleon -- were conspiring to change with amazing rapidity not only English civilization, but that of the rest of Europe and of a great part of the civilized world.

The scene which Meredith left in 1909, after a long life of eighty-one years, ending with an autumnal flowering of his literary reputation, was essentially the world of to-day, a twentieth century world struggling against the despair of adjusting human nature to the complex machine-made civilization of which it is the inheritor. During Meredith's long span of life, he saw the rise and triumph of those twin spirits dominant in the Victorian Era -- moral fervor and material progress. He saw and shared in the reaction against their

triumph. He saw the Victorian conviction that the individual life is inestimably precious and significant and that its brevity must be atoned for by all absorbing work, give way to the negation that a single person can do so little to benefit the race that it scarcely pays to work at top speed. He saw society's concept of individual sin change from that of an overwhelmingly dreadful thing into that of the personal psychological problem.

"The old order passeth", may well be said of his experience of life, for his England was in a continual fever of transition. In that England social, political and religious reforms followed close upon one another. Thought was revolutionized as completely as was industry. Philistinism held sway, even though there were voices crying aloud against it. The story of Meredith's own life is typically a Victorian story, for arising from the lower middle class, he attained eminence in an age which produced God's plenty of eminent characters who arose from the middle class. He shared the reforming spirit, in particular, for with the aid of his pen, inspired by his facetious Comic Muse, he preached the gospel of a new feminism. His philosophy was shaped at the wheel of the resurrected and popularized theory of Evolution. The breaking down of the barriers of social distinction between the middle class and the nobility on one hand, and the middle class and the populace on the other attracted his attention and furnished him

with themes for many novels. As a result of his interest in the political stmuggles of the day, he created the character of an idealistic, radical hero. In every phase of his career, his life, his interests, his art, there were ties which bound him to his age. The Victorian stir animated him.

Until almost his seventieth birthday, the world was not curious about the life of Meredith. He himself has told very little of his early days. He was born at Portsmouth, in Hampshire, on February 12, 1828. He was always reticent about the place of his birth, and on at least one occasion, apparently untruthful, for he told a census taker that it was "near Peterfield." He was undoubtedly of mixed Irish, Welsh, and English origin. He was proud of his Welsh ancestry, and it is often pointed out that he sentimentalizes Welsh characters in his novels, notably the Powys in Sandra Belloni.

His insight into the life of lowly types of character may be the keener for his descent from working folk. On the authority of Mr. J. B. Priestley, Meredith's biographer for the English Men of Letters series, Evan Harrington is accepted as largely autobiographical. The "Great Mel" was Melchizedek Meredith, the novelist's grandfather. The three Harrington sisters, Louisa, Harriet, and Caroline, were Meredith's own aunts, Louisa, Harriet, and Catherine.

His grandfather owned a naval outfitter's shop in Portsmouth, which is mentioned by the novelist Marryat in Peter Simple.[1] Meredith was probably impelled by his extraordinary pride and sensitiveness to avoid all mention of the shop in his young manhood, but probably in later years, under the influence of Thackeray's Book of Snobs and his own mature sanity he grew ashamed of his shame of the tailor's shop. Certainly, the story is told en haute voix in Evan Harrington.

George was the only child of the "Great Mel's" youngest son, Augustus Urmston Meredith, and Jane Eliza Macnamara, the daughter of an innkeeper. She is described as a handsome and refined woman, of Irish descent. In boyhood, the future novelist was a proud, lonely little fellow known to other children as "Gentleman Georgy". His mother died when he was five years old, and he was brought up with no other company than his elders. He was both handsome and precocious, but was not appreciated by his father, who soon married his housekeeper, failed in the tailor shop, and moved to London. George was left in St. Paul's School at Southsea.

When he was fourteen years of age, the trustee of his mother's small estate sent him to Neuwied on the Rhine, to a school kept by the Moravians. This order of religious men was conscientiously devoted to the ideals of Christian

[1] Priestley, George Meredith, p. 5.

life and liberal education for the young. During Meredith's stay at Neuwied, a number of English boys were in attendance. He had been preceded by several who later became eminent, among them Henry Morley, who never ceased to praise the influence of the Neuwied school days upon all who had experienced them.

Germany at this period, a few years before the revolutionary outbursts of 1848 was a scene of enthusiastic, liberal and national activity. The ideal of social service was there receiving shape. Religious tolerance and reaction against narrow provincialism were in the atmosphere.

> We may conclude that something of this spirit of liberalism, which must have been electrical in the air of Neuwied in the earlier years of last century, entered into the young Meredith and conditioned the shaping of his mind, [2]

writes Mr. J. A. Hammerton, a well known critic of Meredith and collector of Meredithiana. Meredith also owed to Germany the inspiration for Farina and the German scenes in Harry Richmond. His overtones, which are so highly romantic, and his fantastic style and indifference to form and construction in his prose are also evidences of German influence.

On leaving Neuwied in 1844, Meredith joined his father in London. He became the assistant of a solicitor, Charnock, who introduced him to a group of young and aspiring literary men. His first work, a poem, appeared in their

[2] Hammerton, J. A., George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 5.

little manuscript magazine The Monthly Observer, in 1849. At this time Meredith was left without family ties for his father went to Cape Town. The senior Meredith remained there until 1863, and upon his return to England, he went to Portsmouth and retired, living there until his death in 1876. Meredith paid him a few short visits. There was little affection on either side.

One of the early friendships formed by Meredith was that with Edward Peacbok, the son of the novelist, Thomas Love Peacock. Edward introduced his friend Meredith, who was just twenty-one, to Mary Ellen Nichols, his sister, the widow of a naval officer. She was thirty, beautiful, and witty. He fell madly in love with her, and in spite of the warnings of her better judgment, she finally consented to marry him in August, 1849. For a while they lived abroad. Upon their return to England they lived a part of the time with her father, and a part with other literary friends. They collaborated upon a work entitled, The Art of Cookery. Meredith also worked constantly upon his verse, and produced a book of poems which was published at his own expense in 1851. The book was poorly received, and the unhappiness over its reception was augmented by the fact that Meredith could ill afford the financial loss.

In 1853, while the Merediths lived at Peacock's, at

Lower Halliford, a son, Arthur, was born. Their other babies had died in infancy. The increasing family, and the quarrels of the hot tempered couple disturbed the peace of Thomas Love Peacock too greatly, so that they were forced to set up housekeeping in a rather poor style, across the way. By 1858, the poverty, sorrow, and quarrels had quite overcome the love of Meredith's wife. She deserted Meredith for an artist, Henry Wallis, leaving the child with him. Her escapade was over within a year, after which time she returned to the neighborhood in broken health. She died two years later. It is significant that in spite of Meredith's later championing of the cause of unhappily married women, he never forgave his wife, never visited her, and never talked of her flight. The Ordeal of Richard Feverel opens with just such a cloud hanging in the background of Sir Austin's household. It was written the year following Mrs. Meredith's desertion of him. Shortly after her death he published the sonnet sequence, Modern Love, and in it his inward sorrow became articulate.

Little is known of Meredith's association with Peacock, although Dr. Middleton of The Egoist is thought to bear traces of the elder novelist's Epicurean character. Priestley offers the opinion that Meredith's long dedication to the Comic Spirit may have been inspired by Peacock,

who was himself somewhat a worshipper of Thalia.

In the middle of the fifties, Meredith's allegory, The Shaving of Shagpat, was published. It was reviewed enthusiastically by George Eliot in The Leader. In 1857 appeared Farina: a Legend of Cologne, which was less successful than the preceding work.

After his wife's flight in 1858 Meredith moved to London with his son, Arthur. He began work immediately upon Richard Feverel, which was published in 1859, that marvellous year, which saw among its illustrious literary output, the publication of the Origin of Species, the Tale of Two Cities, the Idylls of the King, and The Virginians. Meredith's book received a long and important review in the Times, so that his failure to secure popular approval cannot be laid to neglect by influential literary media. In spite of his failure to attain popularity as great as that of his contemporary novelists, his long stories, Evan Harrington (1861), Vittoria (1866), and others were sufficiently popular to merit publication in prosperous periodicals.

During the next year or two, his circle of acquaintances came to include the Carlyles, and Captain William Frederick Maxse, a friend until Meredith's death. He was the original of Nevil Beauchamp. As Meredith's literary contacts increased his vocational interests expanded, and he busied himself with many literary activities. He

found hack work a necessity, if he wished to satisfy his rather aristocratic tastes; so he entered a journalistic career as a regular contributor to the Ipswich Journal. He lived in Suffolk, but went weekly to London. In 1866, he was sent to Italy as a special war correspondent of the Morning Post. In 1867 he acted as editor of the Fortnightly Review for John Morley, who was in America.

Although journalism was never a pleasant activity to him, his work as a publisher's reader was one of the greatest pleasures of his life. In 1860 he became literary adviser to his publishers, Chapman and Hall, and for thirty-five years remained their reader. He had by 1860 become acquainted with Rossetti and Swinburne through his contribution of poems to Once a Week. Rossetti used his head as the model for the head of Christ in a picture of the Magdalene. Other literary friends were received during this period at his small country house in Surrey. He was friendly with Lady Duff Gordon and her daughter, who introduced him in turn to other celebrities. He was fond of walking about the Surrey country, which was the source of much of his poetic inspiration.

Once a Week printed Evan Harrington serially in 1860. Meredith travelled extensively the same year with his little son in Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. Upon his return to England, he published Modern Love and Poems by the

Roadside, which were admired by Tennyson and Browning, and defended against criticism by Swinburne.

In 1864, he married Marie Vulliamy, the youngest of the three daughters of a Surrey neighbor, of Huguenot extraction. This marriage, except for its resultant estrangement with his son, proved as happy as his first had been tragic. Sandra Belloni, then called Emilia in England, appeared the same year.

In 1865, a son, William Maxse, was born. His older son, the sensitive Arthur, resented the presence of the new family in the household, and having a small independent fortune, gradually came to be entirely estranged from Meredith, refusing all overtures, even when fatally ill in 1890. Rhoda Fleming (1865) and Vittoria (1866) were both failures. Meredith was able, however, three years later to purchase Flint Cottage, at Box Hill, in Surrey. It was a beautiful old house, facing an expanse of open country. There he lived for forty years, until his death in 1909.

In spite of Meredith's failure to attain popularity, he continued to write and to find publishers. The Cornhill Magazine in 1870 and 1871 published the Adventures of Harry Richmond. In 1875, Beauchamp's Career appeared and was more favorably received than any previous work of Meredith's had been. During this decade of the seventies

he wrote poems and short prose pieces, and at least one famous essay, that on the Comic Spirit, which he delivered as a lecture in London in 1878. His famous workshop, the chalet, was built on high ground at the back of the garden of his Box Hill cottage. Here he wrote The Egoist, published in 1879, which was an undoubted success. His Surrey estate became a sort of literary shrine, where he was worshipped by young admirers. Fruitful literary friendships were formed with Morley, Stevenson, Henley, Barrie, and Leslie Stephen. The latter was the original of Vernon Whitford in The Egoist.

Because of ill health, Meredith was forced to travel in France for a period. He did not cease work, however, for in 1880 The Tragic Comedians appeared, and a collection of poems containing some of his finest verse, Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth, followed in 1883. In 1884, the most successful of his novels, Diana of the Crossways, was published. It was a source of some annoyance to Meredith in spite of its success, for he had based it on a story of Mrs. Caroline Norton, friend of Lady Duff Gordon, and a descendant of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who had been falsely accused of betraying a political secret to the Times. A relative of Mrs. Norton insisted that the novelist should help to suppress the story, since he had helped to circulate it. All later editions of Diana were there-

fore prefaced by an explanatory note disclaiming all personal reference in the novel.

After the death of his wife in 1885, Meredith turned again to the writing of poetry, and in 1888 published A Reading of Earth. The novel, One of Our Conquerors, appeared in 1892, Lord Ormont and His Aminta in serial form in 1893, and The Amazing Marriage in 1895. One of Our Conquerors was accepted eagerly by a public which had been captivated by Diana, but which found Meredith in this new book the victim of a labored style, increasingly difficult to follow. The change in style had not been sudden, but all the most annoying mannerisms of former books were here unsuppressed. The unconventional treatment of unsuitable marriage was responsible for a fairly high degree of public interest in the last two novels. The Amazing Marriage is also memorable for the figure of Gower Woodseer, drawn from Meredith's memory of Robert Louis Stevenson in his youth.

Celt and Saxon was begun about the same time, but was left unfinished, and was published posthumously. Meredith's prose work was finished now, although his poetry continued to flow. A paralysis which had followed his first serious illness in the late seventies, returned with increasing enervation. Deafness attacked him. He was forced to remain at Box Hill, to which pilgrimages were

constantly made to see him. He finally broke his leg in a fall, and resorted to the picturesque equipage of a bath chair, drawn by his donkey, Picnic, to help him continue his out-of-door activities.

Among the honors which came to him, late, was the presidency of the Society of Authors, after the death of Tennyson in 1892. He was granted the Order of Merit. His seventieth and eightieth birthdays were occasions of almost idolatrous celebration.

He died, the last representative of a great period, in May, 1909, and was buried beside his wife in Dorking Cemetery, in his beloved Surrey country side.

The descriptive phrase, "the last representative of a great period" has caused much of the critical warfare over Meredith. Is he the last great Victorian or the first modern? Some critics, notably Priestley, refuse him kinship with the Victorians in scarcely anything save the chronology of his lifetime, for he was near his sixtieth year when the fin de siecle movement sounded the knell of Victorianism in literature. Almost all his important novels had been written, and A Reading of Earth was just appearing.

Some critics praise this quality of detachment from his age, and compare him with Shakespeare in at least one quality: "He was not of an age, but for all time."

That Merddith has a great deal of social satire in his novels, no critic disputes. How, then, he can be separated from the other great artists of his period who satirized Victorian society in their novels, or openly condemned it in their essays, seems rather mysterious. By its very nature, satire as a literary medium ties an artist rather more inextricably to an age than other forms of literature, for that which is criticized in one age may be so changed or corrected in the next that the work becomes pointless, except when studied against the social background of the age which produced it. Changes in customs are often effected, but in the fundamental traits of human character, rarely. Whatever claim Meredith may lay to literary genius may be based perhaps on the fact the exposition of the fundamental traits of human character bulks much larger in his novels than his criticisms of social custom.

There has been rather too much accord among Meredith's critics concerning his lack of allegiance to his age. The position usually assumed is that he did not think like a Victorian, and that his works are not of the sort that can be "dated" as Victorian.

For instance, among Meredith's latest critics is Robert Esmonde Sencourt, who ventures this opinion;

> His were not the current ideas, and there was nothing else in Meredith's method

to make them popular.[3]

Later the same critic writes:

> Like many of his contemporaries he thought that Darwin in his theories of the origin of species had said the last word on the book of Genesis, and that the Church stood or fell with the theory of verbal inspiration. [4]

In other words, the author says in one place that Meredith did not believe as his contemporaries did, and in another, that he did believe as some, at least, believed. Why not say once for all that which more nearly approaches the truth: Certain of Meredith's ideas were not the Victorian ideas. Certain others were.

Writing more directly to the point, Mr. J. P. Priestley in his George Meredith, gives it as his opinion that the first thing to be noted about Meredith's attitude is the curious way in which he seems to escape the age in which he lived. Meredith, in his eye, is in the nineteenth century but not of it.

> He looks forward and backward. In some respects he clearly looks back to the eighteenth century whose wits and fine ladies and gentlemen, whose social sanity...stir again in his narratives...Yet in other respects it is obvious that he looks forward to our own century which arrived when he was past seventy...Meredith's head and shoulders are still too broad to be squeezed into any of those Victorian frames that we gild so lavishly with our post-War irony.

[3] Sencourt, Life of George Meredith, p. 147.
[4] Ibid., p. 202.

> He escapes from his age so completely that at times only chronology can reassure us. [5]

A bit later, Priestley adds that

> Meredith's ideas, of course, must have a history, and if we pressed him we should discover that the body of his opinions does not differ very much from those of his philosophical Radical friends of the mid-century. [6]

Finally, in whole-hearted support of Priestley's comment, Richard H. P. Curle may be quoted:

> He is really a modern in the best sense of the word, too alert to fall into the pitfalls of the mid-Victorians, and too intellectual not to appreciate the march of progress. [7]

Before seeking to determine just how far Meredith's "reading of life" was born of his reaction to or against the customs and ideas prevalent in his England, we must sift with some care the social history and the social and literary criticism of the Victorian Era. Only by reconstructing a rather full picture of society during the years which lapsed between the publication of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and that of The Amazing Marriage can we determine how fully and correctly he interpreted that society.

[5] Priestley, J. B., George Meredith, p. 63.
[6] Ibid., p. 66.
[7] Curle, R. H. P., Aspects of George Meredith, p. 31.

CHAPTER TWO.

THE VICTORIAN AGE.

The period of Queen Victoria's reign, extending from 1837 to 1901, is much too long and rather too widely different in its characteristics to be treated as a unit. The dates between which Meredith's most important novels were published, 1859 and 1895, are not contemporaneous with the beginning and end of the Victorian Era, since the greatest and most characteristic of Meredith's work was done in the sixties, seventies and early eighties. The period which saw the publication of Richard Feverel, saw Mid-Victorianism at its height. It is that period and the two following decades which concern us here, for it is the period in which the formative influences arising just before and during the early years of Victoria's reign have effected their mission, and the forces making for decadence and reaction have begun their work.

Queen Victoria ascended the throne of England in 1837. The spirit of reform and of progress, which was to dominate at least a half century of the era to which she gave her name, was already at work. The work it wrought eventually was the complete destruction of the lingering eighteenth century world, and the creation of our modern era.

From the point of view of today, then, the Victorian Age is, first of all, an era of transition, and of adjustment through social and political reform. Our own generation is the inheritor of its accomplishments. Our literary and social critics have grown pungently satirical or bitter in their estimates of these accomplishments. We have attributed to our Victorian ancestors all that is stultifying and crass in our lives. We have attributed to "barren philosophy", the faults of the great Victorian ancestors, meanwhile leaving their excellences, for the most part, out of account. We have debated whether it was a period of pious belief or dignified agnosticism or honest doubt; whether it was characterized by unprecedented social progress or muddled social equivocation.

In order that we may be adequately aware of the miracles wrought during this decided period, and may interpret correctly our composite picture of English society in the sixties, let us look for a moment at the world which George Meredith's ten year old eyes observed in the year of Queen Victoria's accession.

Walter Besant in his social study, Fifty Years Ago, written during the late eighties of the last century, draws an inclusive picture of social England in the thirties:

> Rank was still held in the ancient reverence; religion was still that of the eighteenth century

church; the rights of labor were not yet recognized; there were no trade unions; there were no railways to speak of; nobody travelled except the rich; their own country was unknown to the people; the majority of country people could not read or write; the good old discipline of Father Steik and his children... was wholesomely maintained; landlords, manufacturers, and employers of all kinds did what they pleased with their own...There were still some fiery spirits in whose breasts lingered the ideas of the French Revolution and the Chartists were already beginning to run their course. The Reform Act had been passed, it is true, but as yet had produced little effect...;the perpetual pensions were many and fat; and for the younger sons and their progeny the State was provided with any number of sinecures. ...Elections were carried by open bribery; the Civil Service was full of great men's nominees...Heavy goods traveled by the canals and navigable rivers... the hackney coach with its pair of horses lumbered slowly along the street; the cabriolet was the light vehicle for rapid conveyance...the omnibus had only recently been introduced...and there were no hansom cabs...If you wanted to send a parcel anywhere in the country, you confided it to the guard of the coach; if to a town address, there were street messengers...there were no telephones, no telegraphs, no commissionaires...;the great railways were all begun, but not one of them was completed...The British Empire in 1837 contained millions of square miles of barren heath and wild forest...It boasted of vast countries, with hardly a single European in them...In 1837 prophets foretold the speedy downfall of an Empire which could no longer defend her vast territories...It was pointed out that there was the dreadful deadweight of Ireland, with its incurable poverty and discontent; the enormous weight of the National Debt; the wasteful expenditure of the government in every branch; the corrupting influence of the Poor Laws; the stain of slavery; the restrictions of commerce; the intolerence of the Church; the narrowness and prejudice of the Universities; the ignorance of the people; their drinking habits...These causes together with discontent, chartism, republicanism, atheism, left no doubt whatever that England was doomed.[1]

[1] Besant, Walter, Fifty Years Ago, pp. 1-13.

There is certainly little enough to cheer us in such a picture. That a nation so darkened and apparently doomed set to work in the spirit erroneously called "optimistic and shallow" by the moderns, is one of the finest testimonials to the courage, ingenuity, and resourcefulness of Victorian society. The young Meredith would have understood little of the vast problems facing his generation, even after his return from Germany in his sixteenth year. But his countrymen were already grappling with their multifarious problems, and during his formative and impressionable years in the forties and fifties, they were already effecting solutions. Although they may not have approached their social reforms in a truly scientific spirit, although the religious beliefs of numbers of them were quaint and laughable, although the common taste in literature and architecture was the taste of the Philistine, and although their moral earnestness may often have been but a kind of officiousness, we cannot laugh away the substantial accomplishments of our grandfathers, nor can we be sure that in the eyes of posterity we shall deserve immunity from criticism, because of our belief in the greater soundness and greater veracity with which we approach our "noble works."

Apropos of the subject of Victorian social reform, Mr. W. R. Inge writes:

> One great interest of the Victorian Age is that it was the time when a new social order was being built up and entirely new problems were being solved. The nineteenth century has been called the age of hope; and perhaps only a superstitious belief in the automatic progress of humanity could have carried our fathers and grandfathers through the tremendous difficulties which the rush through the rapids imposed upon them. [2]

Imbued with this spirit of hope, the Victorians set out to correct the abuses inherent in their social system and to make of the British Empire the most magnificent creation of human government of which history has kept record.

They had begun with the Reform Bill of 1832, which gave the franchise to practically all persons of the upper and middle classes. This, to be sure, was a mere stirring in political life and did not immediately benefit the populace. Eventually, however, the full effect was felt, for as Wingfield-Stratford writes:

> What dominates the whole situation is that between 1832 and 1867, the middle class, as defined by the limit of the ten pound householder franchise, not only ruled politically, but spiritually. In the full glow of vigor and self-confidence, it set itself to the task of straightening out the social and economic tangle caused by the Industrial Revolution. [3]

The agricultural laborers and working men of the town and cities came to feel that the only hope of economic improvement lay in further political reforms. They used the

[2] Inge, W. R., The Victorian Age, p. 9.
[3] Wingfield-Stratford, Those Earnest Victorians, p. 102.

newly developed machinery of popular, organized agitation to keep the ideas of the Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law campaigners before the public. In 1837 the People's Charter was framed, and in it were made the following demands; universal suffrage, vote by secret ballot, annual Parliaments, the abolition of the property qualifications for members of Parliament, payment of members of the House of Commons, and equal electoral districts. The Chartists alienated the sympathy of the ruling class by violence and riots, which continued occasionally until 1848.

The reformers found much to engage their attention in the condition of industrial slavery all over England. The Parliament of 1833 had taken the first step toward its abolition by freeing the youngest group of the child workers. By the year 1847 the working day of women and young people engaged in the textile factories was reduced by law to ten hours between six o'clock in the morning and six in the evening. Children still worked hard on the farms and in the potteries. The miserable condition of the little chimney sweeps finally aroused public sympathy and indignation to such a pitch that the trade was abolished in 1864. The final step in legislation for the betterment of conditions for children -- the bill for universal elementary education, and the provision of a sufficient number of elementary schools to educate the entire school age

population -- was not taken until 1870.

The abuses existing in the army and navy were varied. Barrack-rooms were overcrowded and cold; wives and children slept without privacy among the soldiers in the barracks and on board the transports; the rations were never varied; no entertainment was provided; often, in outlying cantonments, no provision was made for a spiritual adviser. Floggings were common in the earlier days, and purely military offenses were punished in civil prisons.

> It is not surprising that to enlist for life into a service where men were so treated was regarded by the working classes as social suicide, and that parents preferred to see their sons in their coffins rather than in the uniform of her Majesty's army. [4]

By 1881, almost at the end of the period, reforms had been effected in all branches of military and naval service. No phase had been neglected. Among other improvements, the enlistment periods had been shortened, and the conditions of living for the soldiers and sailors had been made tolerable and even comfortable.

One of the social scandals of early Victorian England, was the system of punishment for crime. The penal laws were inhumanly rigorous. In the beginning of the century, there were 223 capital offenses. Lord John Russell swept away many of these in 1837, with the result that, while in

[4]Traill and Mann, Social England, vol. VI, 1, p. 172.

that year there were 438 executions, there were only fifty-six in 1839. By 1861, almost all the medieval barbarities, such as the dissection of a murderer's body, had been abolished, and in 1868, executions in public ceased.

The prisons, which were centers of overcrowding and iniquity, were gradually reformed. Transportation to the degrading penal colonies of New South Wales and Tasmania ceased. The horrors of the convict ship faded from the dreams of those awaiting the day of sailing. Debtors' prisons, however, and the milder debtor's jail for capitalists who failed in business remained in full swing until 1869.

While these glaring social abuses were receiving correction under the energetic direction of the "earnest Victorians", economic reforms were also instigated. The Anti-Corn-Law League, founded in Lancashire in 1838, under the leadership of Richard Cobden and John Bright, attempted a fundamental reform in the economic condition of the poor by agitating for the free importation of wheat. Their Free Trade arguments gradually weakened the resistance of the opposition. The Irish famine of 1845 served finally to convert public opinion. The repeal of the Corn Laws followed in the next year.

The wholesale suffering of the starving Irish was

shared by the English poor. The changes in the Poor Laws of 1834 had served to increase misery. The laws had not been modified in harmony with the liberal, humane, reforming spirit, but in harmony with the spirit of material progress. The populace was subdued under their operation to the interests of the factory owners. Previously, the Justices of the Peace had supplemented wages out of rates. Charges were brought against the system that it stimulated a reckless increase of population and shiftlessness. The system was therefore supplanted by that of the Union workhouses. Rather than be sent to these, the poor preferred to work for the smallest pittance and stay in their own miserable dwellings, continually on the verge of starvation. Rage at the factory owners who inspired this new legislation was a part of the flame which broke out in the Chartist agitation not to be smothered completely until its collapse in 1848. Describing unforgettably the effect of the Union workhouses upon the poor, Wingfield-Stratford writes:

> At one end of the scale little children, destined for the sweated labor market, were being inured to misery on the cheapest possible terms; at the other, Joan was being torn from Darby lest any spark of love should mitigate the wretchedness of their declining years...Now that it was better to be dead than

a pauper, pauperism was reduced to a minimum. [5]

Revolutionary outbreaks occurred all over Europe in the year 1848, in Germany, Hungary, Italy, and France. This spirit in England was shown in a last uprising of the Chartists, which, however, lacked fire and enthusiasm. Its hour had really passed in England, for by the "combined beneficial results of the Factory Acts, Free Trade, the New Poor Laws (1846) which contracted the area of misery and unemployment," [6] a great revival of trade ensued, and industrial conditions were ameliorated. The next few years saw the rapid rise of Trade Unions, Cooperative Business, and Commercial Treaties. Great Britain, "because of her shipping, her geographical position, her possession of iron and coal in large quantities and her immense manufactures of cotton and silk, became the workshop of the world." [7]

The great reform movement was no longer the chief spirit animating Victorian life. It had accomplished its mission. The changes wrought under its influence were objective and tangible. Society had responded to its unifying spirit, and had zealously worked under its influence. We can estimate more definitely what the reforming spirit meant in Victorian life, than what the spirits of "moral earnestness" and "compromise" meant. Such terms are at

5 Wingfield-Stratford, Those Earnest Victorians, p. 103.
6 Traill and Mann, Social England, Vol. VI, 1, p. 423.
7 Boas and Hahn, Social Backgrounds of English Literature p.223.

best but nuclei around which to collect ideas; but remembering that "the application of ideas to life" is the business of literature, it becomes the duty of research to discover in the period, and in the works that represent it, the ideas which are characteristically Victorian.

Intellectual and spiritual movements were hardly less varied and energetic than the reforming movements. Mr. W. R. Inge informs us that:

> From about 1840...there was an unparalleled output of books of all kinds, a very large reading public and a steadily increasing number of professional authors dependent on the success of their popular appeal...The Victorians now extended the imaginative sensibility which had been expended on nature and history to the life of the individual. This meant that the novel instead of the poem was to be the characteristic means of literary expression, and even the chief Victorian poets...are sometimes novelists in verse. [8]

It is not a far step from this increasing consciousness of the preciousness and significance of the individual human life, to an aggressive individualism. This individualism was likewise stimulated by the utilitarian philosophy. Even while the social philosophers of that system demanded happiness for the greatest number of Englishmen, the emphasis was laid upon the rights of the individual Englishman to happiness.

[8] Inge, W. R., The Victorian Age, p. 37.

The romantic breeze which had blown out of Germany, with its attendant currents of color, sweetness, and a certain mysticism, had not spent its force. The Romantic tradition and German influence were the high priests directing literary trends in the works of Carlyle and of Tennyson. The publication in 1855 of The Life and Works of Goethe by George Henry Lewes augmented the power of these influences. Of the early Victorian culture, romance was the very breath. Nothing was so dear to the feminine heart as a delicate, sentimental, refined melancholy.

> The sensibility deplored by Jane Austen had become a part of ordinary good manners, and ladies showed their breeding by an occasional fainting fit, or mild hysterical outburst. [9]

Later in the period, with the complete triumph of the middle class, stronghold of Puritan earnestness, a more rigid discipline was applied to the extravagance of romantic feeling, and the eleventh commandment became; "Thus far shalt thou react -- and no further."

The unprecedented material progress of England was helping to build up a smug, self-satisfied attitude among the middle class, who were the real rulers of England They worshipped the machinery which was aiding them in their conquest of environment, and came to value every-

[9] Wingfield-Stratford, Those Earnest Victorians, p. 98.

thing in terms of machinery. Carlyle, Arnold, and Ruskin, while they themselves were members of the middle class, protested against this worship of machinery, against the capitalistic organization of industry which was making ugliness the preeminent feature of daily life, and against helotage.

Upper class culture had lost the spirit of the eighteenth century. The day of great collectors who enriched England with choicest works of foreign art had passed.

> The great age of furniture ends with Sheraton...All the wheels and chimneys of the Black Country could not give birth to one little china shepherdess of the lost exquisiteness, or perpetuate the secret of Wedgwood...Progress was at work, a Deity, more beneficent in his workings than those worshipped in temples...A new England was springing up in the North and Midlands. Squalid and smoke begrimed towns grew with mushroom rapidity, providing some sort of shelter for enormous herds of human beings...cut off from all the beauties and amenities of civilization. It was a spectacle that caused such a heart as Macaulay's to rejoice greatly. [10]

This decline in taste was characteristic of the Victorians. Everyone was too busy to think of exquisite and beautiful living. No superiority was attributed by the "Barbarians" or the "Philistines" to the artistic furniture of the eighteenth century, since factory made articles lasted quite as well. The mid-century homes

[10] Ibid., pp. 25-36 -- extracts.

were drab, solid, and yet pretentious in their decoration. Such color as remained appeared often in hideous, discordant combinations. Red plush was a favorite material.

The upper class also partially justified Arnold's designation of them as Barbarians by the way in which they caused art treasures to be destroyed. Under their careless living conditions, priceless tapestries were used for carpets, and exquisite prints were cut up to make nursery screens.

No political leaders appeared among the lords comparable to the eminent sons of the bourgeoisie -- Peel, Cobden, Bright and Gladstone. The Tories found themselves forced to turn for leadership to Disraeli, a middle class Jew. In the sixties the long continued struggle between Disraeli and Gladstone was at its height. There was much discussion and some acceptance of "philosophical radicalism", even among the lords.

> When Gilbert wrote a song to the effect that in good Queen Bess's time,
>
> 'The House of Lords made no pretence
> To intellectual eminence
> Or scholarship sublime,'
>
> the words would exactly fit the Victorian aristocracy. [11]

It is small wonder that the intellectual leadership

[11] Ibid., p. 285.

of these gentlemen should cease, since they spent their days galloping over the countryside after foxes, shooting hares and game birds, training race horses, and betting on the results of their running. Withal, throughout the era "a lord was a lord," and quite an autocratic, despotic person in his country. His status secured him privileges which seemed rooted in the nature of social organization. He was not carefully educated, since he had no particular need to be so. Among the villagers, he preserved traditional respect and loyalty by furnishing animals for roasting at "harvest homes," an occasional barrel of beer for cricket matches, and gifts of warm clothing at Christmas time.

Although English society had these class distinctions, the lines between the groups were never so tightly drawn as among the French, nor were the barriers so nearly insuperable. Englishmen, especially younger sons, had gone into trade at home, and others had ventured into empire building in every activity from planter to pirate. The monetary power had rather shifted from the landed gentry to the commercial class, and the newly rich became snobs of a sort that had not been known in less flexible eighteenth century society. The rapidity with which fortunes were made and lost created a state of social "fluidity." The social climbers, having money, next idealized noble

birth, and became the worst of snobs. The long campaign conducted by Punch, through Thackeray's "Snob Papers" and cartoons, is one of the most amusing social studies of the age. It had as its purpose the elevation of that honest English ideal, that it was far better to be respected for what one was, be it merchant or tradesman, than to be furtively ashamed of one's rank.

There were superficial differences between the actual appearance of the Mid-Victorians and that of their ancestors and of their progeny. The dress of the ladies showed an astonishing volume of crinoline with skirts billowing around them, reaching the ground. Indoors, their skirts trailed far behind along the floor. Their coiffures consisted of masses of real or "false" hair rolled up in chignons, or severely parted in the middle and dressed in bunches of ringlets over each ear. Hats were high in the back to make room for the chignon in its net.

The men wore the bowler or high silk hat on almost every occasion. Old fashioned stocks and frilled shirts added to the complications of life for the laundress, and the side ornaments known as the Dundreary whisker added to those of the barber.

Thus decorated, our solemn grandparents went out to air their ideas concerning certain typically Victorian cults and ideals. Among the cults was that of work,

preached en haute voix by Carlyle and engendered by the peculiar moral earnestness common to almost all the great Victorians. It took more than twenty years of patient research to produce the Origin of Species, fourteen years for Carlyle to write Frederick the Great, and seven years for Browning to complete the Ring and the Book. Work was even a definite element in Victorian religion, and "Faith without works" was probably never so surely thought of as dead.

The religion of the Victorians has been the subject of much smart talk by the moderns. The Deity of the intellectuals and the Lord of the masses were, of course, quite separate. The faith of the former was fixed upon a force of which Wingfield-Stratford writes:

> It was His method to eschew overt interference with the workings of nature or the order of society, but in some subtle and usually unexplained way, He did manage to harmonise and direct them...; He is a 'power not ourselves making for righteousness'; He is a 'life force'; He is the spirit of progress, the world spirit, the Unknowable, Evolution, 'an increasing purpose,' but always with the same amiable capacity of contriving that,
>
> 'somehow good
> Shall be the final goal of ill'. [12]

The God of the great populace, of the evangelical sects, and sometimes, regrettably enough, the God of the leaders of educational reforms, was first of all the Pu-

[12] Ibid., p. 61.

ritan God, who was stern and unrelenting in his punishment of evil, by the inevitable method of casting it into an unbelievably hot and eternally uncooling hell. Lytton, Strachey tells in Eminent Victorians, a story of Dr. Thomas Arnold. This eminent man stood looking out upon the lake of Como and was appalled by the contrast of its overwhelming beauty with the thought of moral evil. He cried out, "May the sense of moral evil be as strong in me as my delight in external beauty, for in a deep sense of moral evil, more perhaps, than in amything else, abides a saving knowledge of God."[13]

Later this stern God, who could best be felt or known through "a deep sense of moral evil," was softened in aspect. The Wesleys and their women followers had glorified a tender, loving Savior who shared worship with the God of Terror. For the masses, however, the ministry thought it best to keep religion largely a matter of discipline. The burning Hell was not to be tampered with, for it kept the poor and ignorant in check. The observance of the Sabbath in a stern and joyless manner became symbolical of the triumph of discipline. The clerics themselves felt the press of discipline, for there was a return of the sort of shepherd who labored tirelessly to perform his duties as a clerical specialist, and to live

[13] Strachey, Lytton, Eminent Victorians, p. 205.

less like a country gentleman than his eighteenth century predecessors. Even narrow and bigoted ministers became great workers, attending to the bodily needs of their parishioners as well as to the spiritual.

In the religion of the non-Evangelical church, the Oxford Movement had effected a return to highly attractive ritual and ceremonies. The Gothic movement in architecture led to the beautifying and restoring of churches all over England. The church as a whole became more alive and colorful. There was much quibbling over trivialities of organization, but that was far outweighed in importance by the results of renewed religious fervor. Among the upper classes, religion was made the leading principle of their lives, and became a matter of social as well as of individual salvation.

With the publication in 1859 of Darwin's Origin of Species, an open warfare between science and theology became general. The very foundations of Christianity were now felt to be shaky. A realization that the Christian religion was not based on facts, but on inferences, crediting to the divine Creator anything which had not hitherto been explained by science, dawned on numbers of persons for the first time. As a next step, many began to be "honest doubters," and finally to lose their faith altogether.

Inasmuch as Victorian religion and Victorian moral-

ity were so closely related to everything else, -- art, sport, and love, to mention but a few matters -- one of the chief faults urged against the age is that it bound all life to a narrow morality.

> The code of the average respectable citizen was supported by two pillars on one of which was inscribed: 'It pays to be good': and on the other, 'If you must commit sins, at least don't talk about them.' Making all allowances Victorian morality did repose upon the ostrich-like faith that you could best conquer evil by shutting your eyes to its existence.[14]

Society's attitude toward woman and the family was inextricably interwoven with this sort of idea of morality. The purity and respectability of family life remained unsmirched by any suggestion of unrefined, evil, or carnal affection. On questions of conduct, there were no "honest doubters." The proprieties of marriage were regulated by a code. It was not until 1878 that marriage in England could be dissolved without a special act of Parliament, and when divorce was permitted women could not divorce their husbands without inviting social disaster. Breaking of the marriage vow was a violation of a code of honor. Married love was the theme of lofty idealism.

The home was the most important of all the elements in the social scheme. Home making was the career par

[14] Ibid., p. 152.

excellence for women, although there were many who were forced, -- under pitying glances of the more fortunate -- to forego the realization of this ideal. In her study of Victorian working women, Wanda Neff writes:

> Census figures in 1851 show as a result of the growing Empire, the need for a large number of men in the Civil Service was a disrupting factor which kept 24.86 percent of women in England and Wales unmarried at the age of thirty and 11.88 percent unmarried at fifty...and this was in the middle of the nineteenth century when the only suitable profession for women was marriage...Women as workers did not harmonize with the philosophy of the Victorians, and their deification of the home. Women ought to marry. There ought to be husbands for them. [15]

Woman was conscious of her importance as the source of manpower for the Empire. The large families of the Victorians were their greatest pride. Matthew Arnold, in his essay on Sweetness and Light, writes:

> Why one has heard people, fresh from reading certain articles of the Times on...returns of marriages and births in this country, who would talk of our large English families in quite a solemn strain, as if they had something in itself beautiful, elevating, and meritorious in them; as if the British Philistine would have only to present himself before the Great Judge with his twelve children, in order to be received among the sheep as a matter of right!

The Queen herself was the mother of nine children; a queen who set the example of pious, holy, triumphant

[15] Neff, W., Victorian Working Women, p. 14.

married love and devoted widowhood.

The Victorian father was truly the head of the house, and even enlightened parents did not spare the rod. In Lytton Strachey's Eminent Victorians Dr. Thomas Arnold is quoted apropos of the question of whipping as saying that "it is positively mischievous to accustom boys to think of personal correction as an insult or a degradation." The mother was traditionally meek, subdued, and loving; the children were, as a rule, rough, hardy lads who were utterly unconscious of the existence of an offspring's dignity, and an equal or greater number of obedient, wide-eyed, innocent daughters, who could faint whenever it seemed convenient -- a practice which was probably the result of "ferocious tight-lacing."

Such a conventional picture makes us forget that as early as 1850, there was started in Manchester a Woman Suffrage Society, and that John Stuart Mill had prophesied the imminent emancipation of women. We are accustomed to the notion that the Victorian woman was greatly inferior in intellect and physical health to the modern woman. We are too busy remembering that she was refused admission to the universities to see the great strength of her intellect as indicated by her accomplishments without University education. Elizabeth Barrett

Browning, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and Florence Nightingale are witnesses that the conventional picture of Victorian womanhood is incomplete.

The idea that the health of the Victorian woman was delicate hardly squares with the fact of her frequent child-bearing and of the enormous amount of labor required to bring up ten or twelve children, unaided by modern devices, even when maids were kept. Punch records, in a long series of cartoons and jokes, that the hen-pecked husband was a Victorian institution, the very symbol of servility, and that the wife was much less timid than we suppose.

Women acted as the guardians of the graces and refinements of life. Although their "accomplishments," of which each marriageable daughter was supposed to possess so large a share, are now laughed at, they did serve as a medium of introducing some prettiness into life. Their water-color paintings, pictures in cross stitch, and fancy needle work have at least the quality of prettiness. They were also the "recognized torch-bearers of Victorian piety", for they held not only to the firm, and sometimes cruel, code of morality which no woman dared violate, but they had also the instinct for religious and social service. They conceived it to be their province to exer-

cise a refining and a religious influence over the minds of men. It was their duty to keep society "respectable", and manners formal and restrained.

Outside the home, men were, even in the mid-century, often far from respectable. True, they had laid aside some of the most intemperate and licentious habits which had flourished during the early nineteenth century, but they still liked cruel sports such as dog and cock fights. Their prize fights lacked the softness and effeminacy of the modern encounter, for in some of them there was savage battling. Among the nobility and the populace there were very few teetotallers, and what there were, were not a reforming power.

Cricket was the sport of all classes, and in the country, even the squire or the squire's son played on the local team, often as skipper. Harvest homes were gatherings to which all neighboring farmers sent their laborers, free of expense, for a pastoral outing and feast. The men had huge beef puddings, and mugs of ale; the women, tea, bread-and-butter, and plum cake. There were sports before the meal, and speeches, usually including one by the vicar, afterwards.

Fairs were common in smaller towns, although London, with her two million population, had outgrown the fair even at the beginning of the Victorian period.

> A real old fair, with rows of stalls crammed with all kinds of things, which looked ever so much prettier under the flaring lamps than in the shops, with Richardson's Theatre, the Wild Beast Show, the wrestlers and cudgel players, the boxers with or without the gloves, the dwarfs, giants, fat women, bearded women and monsters was a truly delightful thing to the rustic in the country; but in London it was incongruous... [16]

Among the more sophisticated classes of society, the dance, the tea, the musical, and the reception were the chief forms of entertainment. The opera and theatrical entertainment played a much less important part in the social life of the century than in any previous period, except that of the Protectorate. There was a tremendous amount of energy expended in these gayer activities as well as in the more serious ones, for the Victorians were no half-hearted generation.

Indeed, their energy and enthusiasm made them accomplish an overwhelming number of things. A cross section of their varied activities is likely to seem overcrowded. There is so much to know about them, that one hardly hopes for even adequate knowledge.

Lytton Strachey says very discerningly in his Preface to Eminent Victorians:

[16] Besant, W., Fifty Years Ago, p. 68.

> The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it. For ignorance is the first requisite of the historian -- ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection...

One who would set down the social background of the Victorian Age is faced with almost too great a wealth of detail, and challenged by the attendant problems of selection. By a careful reading of the novels and prose literature of the Age, we should have just as rich a knowledge perhaps, as by the extensive use of ponderous social histories, and undoubtedly a more artistic, if not a truer picture of the entire social scene. If, however, by some unimaginable catastrophe, all records of Victorian social life -- Punch, letters, histories, and novels-- all except those of George Meredith were destroyed, we should still know a great deal about the age. It will be the task of the next chapters to tell what this would be, in the matters of social life and of thought.

CHAPTER THREE.

PROBLEMS AND SETTINGS OF THE NOVELS.

The attempt was made in the preceding chapter to assign to the term "Victorian" as it is used here, certain definite time limits and characteristics. That does not prevent our looking both backward and forward a bit, for the arteries of literary history have shadowy beginnings and endings. In the gentle flow of the stream of literary thought much which was characteristic of each preceding age mingles with the new current to form a richer whole. Therefore, in testing the novels of Meredith against their Victorian backgrounds, much will appear in them as characteristic of the age, which had existed in English society long before Queen Victoria ascended the throne, and which did not cease to exist immediately after Meredith's last complete novel, The Amazing Marriage, was published in 1895. In all Meredith's studies of the highly sophisticated types of character illustrative of an age of formality and restraint, his chief interest was truly in the delineation of that character. In the outline of the traits of this formal age, he has been subtle and suggestive, rather than direct and obvious. The reader must often be attentive to Meredith's creations in the highest degree, in order to discover the

clues by which the author "dates" his own work. In almost all instances the feeling created by the novels is that their stories are exactly contemporary with the author's life. The problems and themes of the novels are almost all inherent in the organization of Victorian society.

The narrative told in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel (1859) belongs to the very early Victorian period. Among the members of the Feverel household there are still surviving two relatives, Great Aunt Grantley and Uncle Hippias, who are children of the eighteenth century. They live chiefly in anticipation and in memory of their dinners. Meredith remarks, helping to fix the period of the novel, "The eighteenth century was a remarkable trencherman."[1] The burning of the hay rick, and Tom Bakewell's subsequent imprisonment for the supposed crime, suggest the period of riots, agitation and destruction of property, just before and during the early years (1837-1848) of the period. The problem presented in the novel, that of the proper upbringing of a child, was a problem which assumed great importance in the nineteenth century. The threefold problem of a parent's overweening tyranny in the control of a child, the segregation of a child (especially of a boy) from all impure (in the Victorian sense) influences, and of intense parental love and solicitousness

[1] The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 7.

for every phase of the child's welfare may be called typical of the era. Not that parents in previous eras had not been interested in the education of children, for we learn from Agnes Repplier's delightful essay on the child prodigies of the eighteenth century, and from anecdotes concerning Dr. Johnson and proud parents, that the genus "infant prodigy" was assiduously cultivated. Even in the seventeenth century there were infants like John Evelyn's little son, who read Latin at three. But the emphasis shifted in the nineteenth century from the development of children as prodigies to their development as individuals of impeccable character. While parents, especially fathers, regarded themselves as entitled to the same sort of obedience as that exacted by the Heavenly Father, they were increasingly aware of the importance and preciousness of the child's life. This state of mind is admirably set forth in Richard Feverel.

The second of Meredith's novels, Evan Harrington (1861), is a study of a longitudinal section of Victorian society a generation after Waterloo. The "Great Mel," who had served in the army against Napoleon, has run the course of his career. All classes are described except the very lowest and very highest. The social fluidity of the era is well portrayed. A tailor is accepted as the suitor and husband of an heiress whose father is in

the diplomatic service. Three sisters of a lower middle class family marry respectively a captain in the Marines, a newly but immensely rich brewer, and a foreign count. The struggle involved, however, in rising from one class to another, shows that the organization of society was not the same as it had been in the early eighteenth century. Then younger sons went frequently into trade and into colonial enterprises involving trade, and the commercial class lost some of the former stigma attached to it. However, the late eighteenth century found the lines between the trading classes and the aristocracy drawn more clearly and boldly, especially when many essentially vulgar persons began to make money easily as a result of the Industrial Revolution. The Victorian era inherited both this tradition of inflexible organization of society and an increasing number of the socially aspiring who would not be denied entrance into the heart of the aristocracy. Evan Harrington is a story of such a struggle.

The next novel, Sandra Belloni (1864) and its sequel, Vittoria (1866) show us the period of the European revolutionary outbreaks of 1848. Meredith's love of liberalism and nationalism, shown in his intense sympathy with Italian character and Italian struggles, foreshadows later works in which the same animating principles are to be

applied to English politics. In Sandra Belloni there is also a great deal of consideration given to the problem of social climbing and snobbery. The use of the artistic or literary "lion" to improve one's social status and to challenge the interest of the aristocratic dilletante was a common practice in the society of the day, and Meredith has shown this clearly in the relations of the Pole family to Sandra. His concept of Sandra as an utterly natural person, almost a "noble savage," is set up in opposition to the Pole sisters, the ladies of the Fine Shades, and Nice Feelings. This theory of the complete goodness of the "natural" person is an inheritance from the Rousseauistic philosophy of the eighteenth century. In Meredith's day, the philosophy that man was better without too many of the refining influences of civilization was still receiving some credence and expression. In America the ideal was suggested in the poetry of Whitman and in a lesser manner in that of other writers. It persists even today, with a difference, in the naturistic school of writers. Of course, the musical talent of Sandra was highly, if informally, cultivated but she was nevertheless a child of nature in the informality and frankness of her manners, and in her lack of social adaptability. Meredith shows, therefore, as he does frequently in later works, a conflict between social organization and an ideal of natural, unaffected and innocent behavior.

Between the two parts of the story of Sandra, Rhoda Fleming was published in 1865. The narrow and inflexible Victorian standard of correct behavior of the sexes appears in this work as a tragic and devastating influence. Young women had been seduced by noble young villains before; in fact, the story of Rosamond Clifford is one of the oldest and best known and most frequently recurrent in English literature. Yet in Rhoda Fleming, parental tyranny, sisterly wrong-headedness, community scorn of weakness for a maiden yielding even under the influence of a great love and of trusting innocence, and finally, a superstitious reverence for the conventional marriage vow, exchanged under no matter what conditions, show how the Puritan iron had entered the soul of society. Meredith's tacit protest in Dahlia's behalf, and his alignment of Robert in sympathy with her, show a broader spirit than any of his characters, even Robert himself, are allowed to show. His treatment of the subject is, however, characterized by a certain reticence and delicacy in writing which mark him irretrievably as "not modern." His contempt for the kind of knowledge which comes from sifting dustbins and brushing cobwebs out of putrid corners is clearly shown by what he does not talk about. The novel almost challenges comparison with the Joanna Godden of Sheila Kaye-Smith, because of

its question of the moral vicissitude of two sisters, one weak, one strong, and because of a similarity of setting and characterization. But those who find Meredith more modern than Victorian, because he sympathizes with, rather than condemns Dahlia, should read Joanna Godden for the purpose of comparing the modern and Victorian approaches to similar problems. The ending of this novel is extremely sentimental, for in the best Victorian manner, Dahlia's death bed scene is made touching:

> Almost her last words to him, spoken calmly, but with the quaver of breath resembling sobs were, 'Help poor girls.' [2]

The Adventures of Harry Richmond (1871) is a novel which the author makes almost exactly contemporary in time with the date of its publication. The German dreams of empire and the union of the small German principalities under a single state are the chief political ideas expressed in the book. There are numerous scenes and studies which help to give the novel English nineteenth century background in spite of its extravagant romanticism. Among them are the scenes of English country life at Riversley Grange and Dipwell, the sturdy prejudices of Squire Beltham, the superficial society at Bath, and the fine study of life at a boys' school as it existed in

[2] Rhoda Fleming, p. 499.

those days. The school has certain traits in common with the schools of Copperfield and Ernest Pontifex, and may be considered to give as true a reading of that sort of life as the other pictures.

Beauchamp's Career (1876) represents the years of the Crimean War. The wave of nationalist uprising and unrest which resulted in the final unification of Germany and Italy in the following decade, was felt in all Europe. An intenser patriotism animated the English nation. Beauchamp's Career reflects this spirit. More important still in the novel is the study of the political struggle between the Liberal and Conservative parties in England. Radical principles were being introduced to modify the program of even the most liberal of the Liberals. Moderate reforms in politics and society gave way to a more sweeping reform of franchise in the Reform Bill of 1867. The question of Woman Suffrage began to engage the attention of a small group. The rise of the imperialist policies was rapid during the decades of the fifties and sixties. In some measure Beauchamp's Career reveals all these interwoven threads of intense nationalism, increasing imperialism, and the greater liberalism in politics. This novel also furnishes an early example of the story of suffering by the individual who is condemned by society, not for illegal or unsocial acts, but for holding radical ideas.

Many modern novels, notably Arrowsmith, have characters who recall Dr. Shrapnel. The conflict between Everard Romfrey and Nevil was typical of the drama being enacted everywhere in England during the mid-century. The struggles of the Tory squires, represented by Romfrey and his friends, who were unwilling to surrender political leadership to the middle class or to the people, against the young, radical group even within their own circle, added greatly to the historical significance of the part played in Victorian life by the nobility.

The story of The Egoist (1879) in the hero of which the author saw all mankind, is not peculiarly suggestive of the Victorian age. Truly, it is a sort of criticism of individualism run to seed in egoism. The fact that the era was one dominated by great and eminent personalities means that there was much stress placed upon the dignity and preciousness of the individual human life. The approach to the reform of society was felt to be made most successfully through the perfecting of each member of the social group. The message of Browning was often the message of an advocate of the supreme importance of each one's living his life to the full. In the cases of persons who lacked elements of real greatness, egoism must have been a frequent outgrowth of the concentrated interest expended upon their development. Meredith saw

a problem of universal human interest in the injustice done by masculine egoism to the personality of woman. The fact of the rebellion which Sir Willoughby inspired in the hearts of young women when they came to know him well, is an indication that Meredith considered women themselves to be alive to a feminist question in society. The Egoist is, therefore, an indirect criticism of the life contemporary with Meredith because it indicates awakening consciousness on the part of Victorian womanhood that men had played the role of tyrants. It is also a criticism of human nature -- universal and of all ages. The ladies, Isabel and Elinor Patterne, and poor, constant Laetitia Dale, are conventional types.

The Tragic Comedians (1880) which is not, properly speaking a novel, offered Meredith another opportunity to inveigh against selfishness, cowardice, and wrong-headedness. The story is a rewritten episode taken from the life of Ferdinand LaSalle, a German Jewish Social Democrat. Meredith is little interested in the presentation of the racial question underlying the whole tragic comedy. In spite, however, of the barrier which race erected between Alvan and Clotilde, without the liberalizing influence of nineteenth century tolerance, the Jewish politician could never have risen to such a place of promi-

nence. Meredith lived during the time when all disabilities because of nationality and religion, were removed in England. Prejudice against Jewish people was passing rapidly away, and although Disraeli is still spoken of in some quarters as if he was a sort of miracle, he captured the imagination of the British public with his frequent brilliant strokes of policy. Continental Europe and England were akin as we have seen in the liberalism which was making possible the rise of Jewish politicians to such positions of eminence. The barrier of social prejudice against which Alvan flung himself foolishly and vainly in his attempt to win a "parent blessed bride" was still a formidable one in England as well as in Austria. The fact that Disraeli became Earl of Beaconsfield was a great tribute to his genius as was his repeated selection as a prime minister.

In Diana of the Crossways (1885) Meredith first set forth the problem which was chiefly to engage his attention in the following decade, the period of publication of his last three complete novels. The problem was that of escape from unsuitable marriage ties, and the penalty exacted by society for the escape. Victorians willingly believed the worst of women who were capable of divorcing their husbands. Little regard was given to their reasons or provocation for doing so. The story of Diana shows also how

much greater were the participation and the activity of women in literary and political circles during the later years of the novelist's career than in the earlier ones. Meredith shows clearly in the development of the plot that even though he championed the cause of women he still believed them to be creatures more easily swayed by emotions than by good sense. The climax of the story -- Diana's impulse to sell Dacier's secret -- illustrates this. His irrevocable belief was evidently the common one of his age that woman's highest mission was to come into harbor with a good kind, steady, devoted and capable husband.

The problem treated in One of Our Conquerors (1892) was similar to those treated by Pinero in The Second Mrs. Tanqueray, by Oscar Wilde in the less serious Lady Windermere's Fan, and by Hardy in Jude the Obscure. The Victorian social restraint was giving way under repeated rebellions by unhappily married couples. Meredith shows the crushing, murderous cruelty of convention toward those who had the courage or the effrontery to live together in a union sanctioned only by love. Nataly was courageous, but sensitive. With a different sort of husband, one who would have been content to live quietly and unobtrusively, she might have been happy. George Eliot, living in an unsanctioned union, was able to triumph over social oppo-

sition. Meredith himself was quite unforgiving of his first wife who deserted him. His own point of view may have shifted somewhat before the date of One of Our Conquerors, for in his idealization, almost sentimental in itself, of Nesta Victoria, he vindicated the step of Victor and Nataly. Whatever his point of view, his novel shows that tragedy is consequent upon breaking the laws of society, church and state, as they were organized in his day. His individuals who have begun the revolt dash themselves to pieces against the adamant of Mrs. Burman Radnor, backed by society.

In the novel, Lord Ormont and His Aminta (1893), Meredith sets the time back half a century to the thirties, but the problem is the same as that of the two preceding novels, and strangely enough, society is less exacting of the law breakers, Matey and Aminta, than of the couples who belong to a later period, although earlier years of the novelist's work. The period of Matey's childhood was contemporary with the Napoleonic Wars. The project of a coeducational school was wisely enough relegated to Switzerland for development.

The Amazing Marriage (1895) was the last of Meredith's complete novels to be published during his lifetime. Celt and Saxon (1910) was both an incomplete and a posthumous publication. The amazing features of the marriage of the

Earl of Fleetwood and Corinthia Jane were numerous. The time of this novel is approximately the same as that of Lord Ormont and His Aminta. It has also the same criticism of the conventional marriage arrangements approved by society. The book opens with a story of an elopement which had taken place eighteen years prior to the meeting of Corinthia Jane and the Earl. Although "Carin" herself was a child of this irregular though legalized union, she is as fine a character as Nesta Victoria. She would tolerate no whisper of divorce in spite of her husband's cavalier treatment of her. She had always been ashamed of the thought of a second marriage, although she was ultimately persuaded to surrender her prejudice and to marry one of Meredith's sentimentalized Welshmen.

SETTINGS

Meredith was concerned not merely with the problems, thought and ideals of his age, but also constantly attentive to the physical environment of his characters -- the actual sights, sounds and impressions of the world about them. His descriptions of nature are notable; his word paintings of a London street or a Surrey estate are filled with closely observed and artistically arranged details. Before discussing this aspect of his work, however, it is

necessary first to consider the problem of his literary method, and especially how closely akin was his treatment of nature to that of other of his contemporaries.

First of all, Meredith treated Nature in his novels from the point of view of a poet. The details which he selected for description were as exact and as intimately chosen as the details in the poetry of Wordsworth. His method of writing about these details is, however, that of romantic realism. No matter how simple the detail, a romantic glamour is cast over the whole. This is particularly true in his earlier novels, and he returns to the method in his very latest novels.

Meredith was a great lover of landscapes and concentrated much effort upon describing them beautifully. He differed markedly from the eighteenth century writers who kept their eyes upon the formal garden, the terrace, the neatly clipped hedge, and the swan pond. The literary influence of Romanticism was the paramount influence throughout his work. Whether his paintings were of scenes alongside the Thames or in the Swiss Alps, they were of a richly decorative, ornate kind which showed that carefully observed details have been suffused with the warmth and color of the novelist's own temperament.

In an analysis of the country of George Meredith, William Sharp writes in his Literary Geography:

> In a sense, he is English of the English; there is none living who more swiftly and poignantly conveys the very breath and bloom of nature as we know it in England, above all in Surrey, and the long continuous vale of the Thames. [3]

Examples taken from Meredith's novels show how subtly he conveys the sense of peculiar beauty of landscape:

> Golden lie the meadows; golden run the streams...The sun is coming down to earth, and the fields and the waters shout to him golden shouts. He comes, and his heralds run before him, and touch the leaves and oaks and planes and beeches lucid green, and the pine stems redder gold...Sweet are the shy recesses of the woodland. The ray treads softly there. A film athwart the pathway quivered many-hued against purple shade, fragrant with warm pines, deep moss beds, feathery fern.[4]

> In the middle of the wood there was a sandy mound, rising half the height of the lesser firs, bounded by a greengrown vallum...Lank dry weeds and nettles, and great lumps of green and gray moss, stood on the poor old creatures' place of habitation, and the moon, slanting through the fir clumps was scattered on the blossoms of twisted orchard trees gone wild again. [5]

> She asked the boy where Mr. Whitford was. Crossjay pointed very secretly in the direction of the double blossom wild cherry...she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer cloud on the sky, showed and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem like higher Alpine snows in noon sunlight, a flush of white. [6]

[3] Sharp, Literary Geography, p. 5.
[4] The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 153.
[5] Sandra Belloni, p. 11
[6] The Egoist, p. 113.

Surely such poetic passages find their chief parallel in the works of Tennyson. Not a chance isolated passage, but a typical one shows how the same quality of romantic realism is characteristic of his landscape.

> Unloved, the sun-flower, shining fair,
> Ray round with flames her disc of seed,
> And many a rose-carnation feed
> With summer spice the humming air.
>
> Uncared for, gird the windy grove
> And flood the haunts of hern and crake
> Or into silver arrows break
> The sailing moon in creek and cove. [7]

This method of romantic realism has caused Meredith's critics to deplore a lack of the illusion of reality in his works. In descriptions other than those of nature, he also gives real details, but throws about them the light of his own intuition and as a result gives what Priestley calls a distorted picture of society. Meredith exercises the artist's function of selectivity with the result that his backgrounds and characters are less realistic in manner of presentation than those of Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope.

The novels do lack local color and "middle distance" when compared with the more realistic works of Meredith's contemporaries. By "middle distance" is meant that space between the reader and the characters of a novel which is

[7] Tennyson, In Memoriam, CI.

filled by the realistic and real conditions of daily living and exactly described environment.

Concerning this lack of "middle distance" and of the illusion of reality Priestley writes:

> They seem to have less connection with time and place than any novels of the century. The mass of stuff that takes up so much space in most fiction and gives to most readers an illusion of reality...is entirely missing from Meredith's fiction. [8]

There is no proof that middle distance is entirely missing from Meredith's fiction. To be sure one rarely finds such passages as this from Dickens:

> As John Dawkins objected to their entering London before nightfall, it was nearly eleven o'clock when they reached the turnpike to Islington. They crossed from the Angel into St. John's Road; struck down the small street which terminates at Sadler's Wells Theatre, through Exmouth Street and Coppice Row -- down the little court by the side of the workhouse, etc. [9]

It is not likely that one out of a hundred who read Oliver Twist has any knowledge of the places named. Therefore the sense of reality for the ordinary reader is not ostensibly increased by such a piling up of detail in mere place names.

In Meredith's descriptions we may find ourselves in a

[8] Priestley, J. B., George Meredith, p. 161.
[9] Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 74 Edition de Luxe.

rather sketchily described Lymport, Bath, Tunbridge Wells, or Wimbledon. We may gain quite an exact impression of Raynham estate and the abbey, of the Crossways, of the Green Dragon Inn. We may feel in spirit the essential quality of the landscape in a London park or by Thames-side, or in sailing the blue water of the Channel, or swimming with Matey and Aminta off Harwich. At times Meredith yields even to a brief bit of description like that formerly quoted from Oliver Twist:

> Past Kew and Hammersmith on the cool smooth water; across Putney reach, through Battersea bridge; and the City grew around them, and the shadows of great mill-factories slept athwart the moonlight. [10]

Numerous examples might be taken from any novel to show that there is much of the "stuff which fills in great spaces in the ordinary novel." The earlier ones, especially those prior to Beauchamp's Career, are richer in this use of detail than those of the later period. A few examples will suffice to show Meredith's manner in the adequate, if not copious filling of his "middle distance":

> After turning through innumerable hedges, leaping fences, jumping dykes, penetrating brambly copses and getting dirty, ragged, and tired, Ripton awoke from his dream of Farmer Blaize...to the vivid consciousness of hunger ...Raynham Abbey was out of sight. They were

[10] The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 411.

> along way down the valley, miles from Lobourne, in a country of soar pools, yellow brooks, rank pasturage, desolate heath. Solitary cows were seen, the smoke of a mud cottage; a cart piled with peat; a donkey grazing at leisure...geese by a horse pond. [11]

> Millinery would tell us that she wore a fichu of thin white muslin crossed in front on a dress of some light stuff, trimmed with deep rose. She carried a grey silk parasol, traced at the borders with green creepers... These hues of red rose and green and pale green, ruffled and pouted in the billowy white of the dress, ballooning and volleying softly like a yacht before the sail bends low. [12]

> Dr. Shrapnel's house was about a mile beyond the town, on a common of gorse and thorn, through which the fir-bordered highway ran. A fence waist-high enclosed its plot of meadow and garden, so that the doctor, while protecting his own, might see and be seen of the world. [13]

> Off we go to the kitchen garden...We admire the extent of the beds marked out for asparagus and the French disposition of planting at wide intervals, and the French system of training peach, pear, and plum trees on the walls to win length and catch sun, we much admire. [14]

> He was ushered into a London house's library looking over a niggard inclosure of gravel and dull grass, against a wall where ivy dribbled. An arm chair was beside the fireplace. To right and left of it a floreate company of books in high cases paraded shoulder to shoulder...Weyburn read the letters on their scarlet and blue facings... The books had costly bindings. [15]

[11] Ibid., p. 19.
[12] The Egoist, p. 169.
[13] Beauchamp's Career, p. 115.
[14] One of Our Conquerors, p. 85.
[15] Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 58.

It is difficult to see how a critic who reads such examples of description can find Meredith entirely lacking in attachment to place and in realistic background. It is impossible to enter into great detail concerning the picture of social customs which Meredith paints. There are a few scenes which may be suggested as high lights in the social pageant of customs mentioned in Chapter Two as typical of the era.

The description of Raynham Abbey in Richard Feverel (p. 32), as a typical country home, even to the wing with its "ghost."

The picnics and celebrations similar to the "harvest homes", described in Richard Feverel (p. 10), in Sandra Belloni (p. 80 ff.), and in Evan Harrington (p. 378 ff.).

The cricket match between Fallowfield and Beckley in Evan Harrington (p. 151 ff.).

The racing interests of Algernon Blancove in Rhoda Fleming (p. 284 ff.).

School life in Harry Richmond (p. 47 ff.) and in Lord Ormond and His Aminta (p. 1 ff.).

Church services in Evan Harrington and in Rhoda Fleming (p. 250 ff.).

Country flower gardens and estates in Richard Feverel (p. 10), Rhoda Fleming (p. 3ff.), The Egoist (pp.10-11), and One of Our Conquerors (p. 81ff.)

London street scenes in Harry Richmond

(p. 135 ff.) and *One of Our Conquerors* (p. 36ff.)

The assemblies at the Aurora and Green Dragon Inns (p. 128 ff.) in *Evan Harrington*, and of the assembly at the Pilot Inn in *Rhoda Fleming* (p. 169 ff.)

The prize fight at Esslemont in *The Amazing Marriage* (p. 167 ff.).

The tramps and gypsy wanderers in *Richard Feverel* (p. 11), and in *Harry Richmond* (p. 87 ff.).

Society at Bath in *Harry Richmond* (p. 335 ff.).

Wedding customs in *Richard Feverel* (rather irregular, p. 308), and in *The Egoist* (p. 375).

Preparation of boys for trades and professions, in *Richard Feverel* (p. 134 ff.) and in *Evan Harrington* (p. 486 ff.).

The prayer of Matey at the bedside of his dead mother, *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* (p. 172).

Musical soirées in *Sandra Belloni* (p. 25 ff.) and in *One of Our Conquerors* (p. 71 ff.).

The theatrical performance in *Rhoda Fleming* (p. 112 ff.).

Occasional references to feminine styles, parties, meals, art criticism, business transactions and travels in nearly all of the novels.

The conclusions to be drawn from the reading of Meredith's novels with close attention to the presentation of

the social scene is that the problems and settings identify him rather definitely with his age. Moreover, much of the English landscape, many pictures of the daily lives of rural and urban dwellers both in their hours of work and of play, and certain vivid snapshots of Victorian environment are artfully combined in his pages into a convincing reflection of "middle distance". His literary method is likewise typical of the same era, and his use of it is sufficiently realistic to enable one to answer rather fully the question used as a touchstone to test his relation to his age, i. e: What should we know of the life of the Victorian Age, if by some unimaginable catastrophe all literary and social documents except the novels of Meredith were destroyed? I should be inclined to answer that our knowledge would be both broad and varied.

CHAPTER FOUR.

THE REFORMING SPIRIT.

To test an author's work against the social ideas and ideals of an age, is to test the author's true relation to his time. Chesterton observes rather sagely apropos of this relation:

"It is useless," says he, "for the aesthete (or any other anarchist) to urge the isolated individuality of the artist apart from his attitude toward his age. His attitude toward his age is his individuality; men are never individual when alone."[1]

Meredith's attitude toward his age is one of the chief marks of the Victorian in him. He was dedicated to the reforming spirit, and even as he wrote page upon page of social criticism, often very thinly disguised as stories, he was yielding to one of the powerful influences which was likewise molding his contemporaries.

In the novels we find the reforming spirit indicated by humanitarian views and interests, and by extreme liberalism in discussions of politics. We find the author attacking egoism, sentimentalism, and echoing the indignant outcries of Carlyle and Arnold against Philistinism. More specific criticism of the weaknesses in Victorian

[1] Chesterton, G. K., The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 9.

society is found in Meredith's brilliant studies of decadent nobility, of snobbery, of moral stringency, of religious hypocrisy, of glorified domesticity and of a falsely sentimental attitude toward womankind.

The key to the understanding of Meredith's social criticism lies in an understanding of his concept of satire and of the Comic Spirit. Although conflicting opinions are presented by the author in many instances, it is evident which he holds in contempt. By his "Thou shalt nots" as well as by his "Thou shalts" we know his ideal of a sane society; in what he protests against as well as in what he simply reveals or advocates, we find the truth of his reading of life.

THE COMIC SPIRIT AS REFORMER.

We have seen that the most eminent of Victorian leaders were dissatisfied with the whole of society. Economic, social, political and intellectual reform engaged their attention. In this particular, Meredith did not escape his age, for the whole of his writing is conceived in a spirit of reform.

Although it was not until 1877, nearly twenty years after the appearance of Richard Feverel, that Meredith formulated his pronouncements on the idea and function of Comedy, he had been attempting the reform of society through

the efforts of the Comic Muse from the beginning of his work. His novels are essentially stories of the lower gentry and upper middle class, although an earl looks down occasionally, and sturdy yeomen frequently look up. Of this class which formed his favorite theme he writes:

> Of this class in England, a large body, neither Puritan nor Baccanalian, have a sentimental objection to face the study of the actual world. They take up disdain of it, when the truths appear humiliating. When the facts are not immediately forced on them, they take up the pride of incredulity. They live in a hazy atmosphere that they suppose to be an ideal one. Humorous writing they will endure, perhaps approve, if it mingles with pathos to shake and elevate the feelings...But of Comedy they have a shivering dread, for Comedy enfolds them with the wretched host of the world, huddled with us all in an ignoble assimilation and cannot be used by any exalted variety as a scourge or a broom. [2]

One reading that might say that here, at last, is a great Victorian who is not interested in the wielding of the "scourge" or "broom" of reform. But he immediately reveals in a complementary passage that he, too, is of the ilk of the reformers.

> Men's future upon earth does not attract it (Comic Spirit); their honesty and shapeliness in the present does, and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate whenever it sees them self-deceived or hood-winked, given to

[2] An Essay on Comedy, p. 27.

> run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions and violate the unwritten, but perceptible laws binding them in consideration to one another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice, are false in humility or mined with conceit -- individually or in the bulk, the spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit. [3]

What "exalted variety" of social reformer ever demanded more of his contemporaries than does Meredith in this exposition of the Comic Spirit? Not Thackeray, for in his Snob Papers, which were gospel against the Victorians, he touched only the "ill-proportioned, overblown, affected, pretentious, fantastically delicate" folk which Meredith writes about. Certainly not Matthew Arnold, that most "exalted" of all "varieties", who demanded chiefly that his fellow Englishmen cease "congregating in absurdities, offending sound reason, being falsely humble, bombastical, or mined with conceit, individually or in the bulk." Not Ruskin nor Newman nor any of the Victorians held up a finer ideal for a smug and materialistic society than did Meredith in the essay on Comedy.

Had he not formulated this statement of the abuses upon which his Comic Muse was to "cast an oblique light", his gospel would have been just as evident in the novels. His parables begin with the first novel and end with his

[3] Ibid., p. 90.

last. The discerning critic finds that Meredith proposed in thus employing Comedy as a "corrective, a disinfectant and a leaven", a rather sweeping and ambitious reform of manners.

The Meredithian Comedy had withal a high seriousness which was essentially Victorian and fervent. There was no lack of the characteristic of moral earnestness in his unrelenting gospel against shams, hypocrisy, selfishness, and social faultiness of society on the higher levels. His contempt is not the less earnest because it is less vitriolic than that of such writers as Carlyle.

The characters and foibles which he was consistent in exposing were varied. Sir Austin Feverel was the exponent of a foolishly conceived system of education, contrary to Nature, and was likewise a victim of his own tyranny. The Countess de Saldar was the princess par excellence of the kingdom of social climbers and snobs, who were one of Meredith's pet dislikes. Arabella, Adela, Cornelia, and Wilfrid Pole were affected and snobbish souls whose spirits and wills were refined to the point of velleity by their dedication to "fine shades and nice feelings." Sir Willoughby Patterne was an individualist run to seed in egoism. Everard Romfrey, a type of English squire, was bound by tradition and complacency to all things British and conventional so closely that he became merely wrong-

headed. Diana Merion had at least one fault, that of emotional instability. Victor Radnor, was a vacillating sentimentalist who did not know what he valued most in society.

The last group of novels, those written in the decade between 1885 and 1895, has as its avowed purpose the effecting of a change in the Victorian attitude against divorce, and in favor of permanent marriages, no matter how unhappy they might prove. Here the author yielded frankly to the tendency to create artistic works as a part of the machinery of reform.

THE HUMANITARIAN SPIRIT.

Meredith shared the interest of his contemporaries in social sins against the lower classes. His characters were chiefly drawn from the upper levels of society, and he therefore was less occupied with the misery and abuses of the populace than were Dickens and Kingsley. His concern with the problems of the underprivileged is indicated by frequent references to their condition in the earlier novels. The fact that such references grow fewer in the later works is one of the best indications that no matter what part of the century was ostensibly represented in the novels, his plots and backgrounds were ever contemporary, for the conditions of the lower classes were constantly ameliorated during the period of his literary activity.

In the earliest novel, Richard Feverel, which represents the perturbed period of the thirties, we find the following scene: As Ripton and Richard were wandering after the encounter with Farmer Blaize during their hunting, they met two strangers, a travelling tinker and a burly young countryman.

> "It was the tinker who renewed the colloquy. 'Times is bad!', said he.
> His companion assented, 'Surely'."

Continuing with the story of his travel to Newcastle the tinker finally says:

> "...'We were as nigh wrecked as the prophet Paul'.
> 'A — who's him?' the other wished to know.
> 'Read your Bible,' said the tinker...'I think down we're agoing...But God's above the devil and here I am, y'see.'
> 'D'ye call that doctrin?'...'He bean't al'ays, or I shoo'n't be scrapin' my heels with nothin' to do, and what's warse, nothin' to eat'...'Luck's luck and bad luck's the contrary. Varmer Bollop, t'other day has 'is rick burnt down. Next night his gran'ry's burnt'...'He takes and goes and hangs unsel' and turns us out o' his employ. God warn't above the devil then I thinks...'
>
> The tinker cleared his throat and said it was a bad case.
>
> 'And a darned bad case', cried Speed the Plough. 'Here's another darned bad case. I threshed for Varmer Blaize...Varmer Blaize messes pilkins. He swears our chaps steals pilkins. 'Twarn't me steals 'em. What do he tak and go and do?...tarns us off ...to scuffle about and starve for all he keers. God warn't above the devil then I thinks'" [4]

The plight of the small independent farmer is dis-

[4] The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 23.

cussed in the case of Farmer Fleming:

> "Queen Anne's Farm missed the flourishing point by one hundred pounds exactly. With that addition to its exchequer it would have made head against its old enemy, Taxation, and started rejuvenescent. But the Radicals were in power to legislate and crush agriculture...Alas!, with the hundred pounds to back him, he could have sowed what he pleased... Instead of which, and while too keenly aware that the one hundred would have made excesses in any direction tributary to his pocket, the poor man groaned in continuous falls of moisture, and when rain was prayed for in church, he had to be down on his knees praying heartily with the rest of the congregation." 5

Beauchamp's Career has numerous disquisitions upon the plight of the poor. Some are written from the point of view of the Tory squire, Everard Romfrey, others from the point of view of Nevil himself, and still others from the point of view of Dr. Shrapnel. Everard tells Nevil:

> "I'll tell you, they belong to any party that upsets the party above them. They belong to the George Foxe party, and my poultry roosts are the mark they aim at. You shall have a glance at the manufacturing district some day. You shall see the machines they work with. You shall see the miserable, lank-jawed, half-stewed pantaloons they've managed to make of the Englishmen there. My blood's past boiling. They work young children in their factories from morning to night. Their manufactories are spreading like the webs of the devil to suck the blood of the country. In that district of theirs an epidemic levels men like a disease in sheep. Skeletons can't make a stand. On the top of it all they sing Sunday tunes." 6

5 Rhoda Fleming, p. 11.
6 Beauchamp's Career, p. 28.

With a deft, ironic turn Meredith reveals at once the cause of all this indignation against the middle class manufacturers on the part of Everard:

> "This behavior of Corn Law agitators and protectors of poachers was an hypocrisy too horrible for comment." [7]

> "Nevil showed that he had gained an acquaintance with the struggles of the neighboring agricultural poor to live and rear their children. His uncle's table roared at his enumeration of the sickly little beings, consumptive or bandy-legged, within a radius of five miles of Steynham." [8]

Nevil's concept of the effects of the enclosure:

> "But what think you of a Government of land owners decreeing the enclosure of millions of acres of common land amongst themselves; taking the property of the people to add to their own. Say, is not that plunder? Public property, observe, decrëed to them by their own law-making, under the pretence that it was being reclaimed for cultivation, when in reality it has been but an addition to their pleasure grounds; a flat robbery from the poor man's cow and goose, and his right of cutting furze for firing." [9]

There are numerous other instances of interest in the poor and under-privileged: the paternalism of Austin Wentworth toward the poor of the neighborhood about Raynham Abbey; the elevation of Tom Bakewell, "the hob-

[7] Ibid., p. 28.
[8] Ibid., p. 32.
[9] Ibid., p. 235.

nail, bacon-munching, beer-swilling animal", to be Richard's companion; Polly Wheedle's sad case in Evan Harrington; the tragedy of Anthony Hackbut's temptation in Rhoda Fleming; the pity aroused by the girls of the London slum in the encounter of Harry Richmond and Temple with them; the overhanging shadow of the Bench, the debtor's prison, in Harry Richmond; the sacrifice of Robert Eccles to pay for the subsistence of Dame Garble whom he rescued from her burning cottage; and Lord Fleetwood's patronage of the Winch sisters' shop.

Meredith shows a ready sympathy in all these scenes, but he rarely dwells on them long. The political struggle was much more attractive to him.

LIBERALISM.

In the novel, Beauchamp's Career, one feels that he meets the hero who was nearest Meredith's own heart. Young Nevil Beauchamp had the kind of political vision which inspired Lord Robert Peel to vote against his own Tory class in order to ameliorate conditions for the poor. Nevil spoke first a Liberal language; under the inspiration of his friend, Dr. Shrapnel, he became an idealistic Radical who actually wanted to apply the principles of the ideal to life. His uncle, Everard Romfrey, whose heir he was, was his most vigorous opponent, for his ideas were those of a baron of the twelfth century.

The battle lines of the struggle among the Conservatives, Liberals, and Radicals in English politics were already drawn up in the sixties, and Beauchamp's Career deals with one skirmish in a sort of political warfare which is continued even to-day. Meredith himself was a believer in a militant nationalistic, radical program. His ideals were born in the "heady" air of Germany in the forties and of the Revolutionary spirit of 1848.

As a tribute to his consistent devotion to these ideals, The Westminster Gazette published the following article on his eightieth birthday:

> Liberalism owes much to him, and while the world of letters is uniting in offering homage to the greatest of living novelists, his services to the Liberal Party may be recalled. The life-long friend of Mr. John Morley, his political faith is akin to that of the Indian Secretary, and to this we may ascribe his steadfastness at that time of great storm and stress, the Home Rule period. Mr. Swinburne forgot his principles in the passion aroused by Mr. Gladstone's proposals. The mild academic Liberalism of Huxley, Tyndall and Tennyson were all lost in the battle of words, but George Meredith stood firm. Considering his long career, the novelist's consistency has been remarkable, for the faith he championed as a political writer in the sixties, he is championing to-day. 10

Through the various characters of his novels, Meredith's interest in politics and his opinions become clear to us. Beauchamp's Career contains many of the keenest reactions to them current political problems, among them

10 Hammerton, J. A., George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 78.

the following:

1 A satirical analysis of the Crimean adventure when the English decided to stand by the "Moslem" on behalf of the Mediterranean,

> "(and the Moslem is one of our customers, bearing an excellent reputation for the payment of debts). He (Nevil) wished to know whether the English people would be so anxious to be at it if their man stood on the opposite shore and talked of trying conclusions on their green fields." 11

2 A keen analysis in tabloid form of the contemptuous attitude of the landed gentry toward the people,

> "'There's the people', sighed Nevil.
> 'What people'?
> 'I suppose the people of Great Britain count, sir.'
> 'Of course they do when the battle's done, the fight lost and won'.
> 'Do you expect the people to look on, Sir'?
> 'The people always wait for the winner, boy Nevil." 12

3 Political aphorisms:

> "Liberalism had the attraction for the orator of being the active force...between two passive opposing bodies, the aspect of either of which it can assume for a menace to the other; Toryish, as against the Radicals,a trifle red in the eyes of the Tory." 13

> "'The Liberal Party beats up the mob for power, and repays it with sops, and is dragging us down from all we were proud of'.
> 'But the country is growing, the country wants

11 Beauchamp's Career, p. 37.
12 Ibid., p. 31.
13 Ibid., p. 137.

> expansion, said Beauchamp, 'and if your gentlemen by birth are not up to the mark, you must have leaders that are'." [14]

Meredith does not make of Beauchamp a romantic young hero who rides roughshod over the machinery and opposition to a political triumph. He is defeated in his stand as a candidate for Bevisham because he was intolerant of the methods of political puffery and chicanery, and because he became known as a disciple of Dr. Shrapnel. In an excellent comment on the novel, Vida Scudder writes:

> Meredith would be a great social novelist, in even the narrowest sense, had he given us nothing but the story of Nevil Beauchamp with its brilliantly contrasted types of the "twelfth century baron" and the radical old Carlylesque doctor, and its Shelley-like young hero, living out between them the exasperating pathos of his 'career'. [15]

Closely allied to the last remark quoted from Nevil, concerning the lack of leadership in gentlemen of birth, is Meredith's own conviction of the decadence among English nobility during his lifetime. He has given us a long series of studies of Victorian aristocrats who are far from admirable.

DECADENT NOBILITY.

The most admirable masculine characters drawn by Meredith are frequently set in opposition to the aristocracy to show the quality of greater manliness in the

[14] Ibid., p. 158.
[15] Scudder, V. D., Social Ideals in English Letters, p.194.

characters of the lower social class. Vernon Whitford is by far the most attractive character of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. Robert Eccles inspires increasing admiration in contrast with the two young Blancoves, one a knave, and the other a fool, in Rhoda Fleming. Harry Jocelyn, Lord Laxley, and the other young noblemen are contemptible creatures when compared with Evan Harrington. Squire Beltham of Harry Richmond and Everard Romfrey of Beauchamp's Career are stronger characters than many of the others, but are hopelessly reactionary and crotchety. Lord Palmet is presented in contrast to Nevil, who is himself closely related to nobility, but of the finer type. Palmet has but one genuine interest in the world, pretty women. He is Epicurean in tastes, spending much time in such occupations as trying the flavor of cigars. Sir Willoughby Patterne is notoriously stupid. The philandering of Sir Lukin Dunstane is a type shown to be the source of unending mischief in society, in Diana, and that of Lord Paulet in Richard Feverel is the source of still deeper tragedy. The Earl of Fleetwood lacks sane, harmonious development of character, being always a battle-ground of pride against kinder impulses and emotions. Lord Ormont is likewise an unbalanced old nobleman.

Wherever strength or proportion exists in the characters of Meredith's leading noblemen it is offset by some

prejudice or dilettantism. An excellent example is that of Romfrey, whose chief interests were hunting and stock breeding. Of all Nevil's feats, the one which was the source of greatest pride to his uncle was the obtaining of a Jersey bull for which a "Yankee" was likewise bidding. The squire was liberal to his tenants except in the matter of indemnification for the damage done to their crops by game. The game laws he regarded as the corner-stone of law, and he believed that an attack on them threatened the structure of justice. He was quick to use the horsewhip as were Laxley and other young noblemen.

FAULTS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS.

If Meredith is satirical concerning the nobleman, he is no less critical of the middle class. In Beauchamp's Career once more, he speaks to the point on social problems:

> "We have signed no convention to respect their -- he speaks of Englishmen, Colonel Halkett, -- Their passive idolatries; we are not parties to the tacit agreement to fill our mouths and shut our eyes. We speak because it is better they be aroused to lapidate us than soused in their sty, with none to let them hear they live like swine... The religion of this vast English middle class ruling the land is comfort. It is their central thought, their idea of necessity, their sole aim... Whatever alarms it, they join to crush...They will pay for the security of comfort, calling it national worship or national defence, if too much money is not subtracted from the means of individual comfort; if too much foresight is not demanded for the comfort of their brains...the people are not with them,

> but against, and yet the people might be won by visible forthright kingly service to a loyalty outdoing theirs as the sun the moon. So it is with a church. It lives if it is at home with the poor. In the arms of enriched shopkeepers, it rots, goes to decay in vestments -- vestments, flakes of mummy wraps for it! or else they use it for one of their political truncheons to awe the ignorant masses." [16]

Other comments in the same vein are the following:

> "The Protestant parson is the policeman set to watch over the respectability of the middle class", [17]

and,

> "The English middle class which has absorbed the upper, and despises, when it is not quaking before it, the lower, will have nothing above it but a rickety ornament like that you see on a confectioner's twelfth-cake." [18]

Of such passages one may truthfully say: "The language is the language of Meredith, but the voices are the voices of Arnold and Carlyle."

REFERENCES TO CONTEMPORARIES.

There are occasional references in Meredith's novels to his contemporaries and to their works. In almost all instances the references are made to authors who were in the vanguard of progressive thought. His praise of the

[16] Beauchamp's Career, p. 325.
[17] Ibid., p. 169.
[18] Ibid., p. 324.

influence they exerted is reserved for those who agitated the complacent thinkers. He is unerringly attracted by the changing, reforming, and stirring phases of their thought.

In the first chapter of Diana of the Crossways, Meredith has quite a long discussion of what he terms "brainstuff". In speaking, presumably of Thackeray, he writes:

> A great modern writer of clearest eye and head, now departed, groaned over his puppetry that he dared not animate them, flesh though they were with the fires of positive brainstuff." 19

This is supposedly a reference to the preface of Pendennis, in which Thackeray apologized for his failure to treat his hero's character as it really was, showing human frailties instead of carefully draped conventionalities.

Writing his opinion of this censorious public which caused Thackeray to feel the necessity of such an apology, Meredith reveals the attitude of the Victorians toward his own early work in the following letter to the Rev. Augustus Jessop dated December, 1861:

> "Apropos of her political counsel she is adapting her wisdom to the mind of the snuffling moralist so powerful among us? Does she know that my literary reputation is tabooed as worse than a libertine in certain virtuous Societies?...that there have been meetings to banish me from book-clubs? and that Paterfamilias has given Mr. Mudie a

19 Diana of the Crossways, p. 14.

very large bit of his petticoated mind concerning me"? [20]

Carlyle, of whom he writes in Beauchamp's Career, is regarded as a source of inspiration to Nevil.

> His favorite author was one writing on Heroes in a style resembling either early architecture or utter dilapidation so loose and rough it seemed; a wind-in-the orchard style...; all the pages in a breeze, the whole book producing a kind of electrical agitation in the mind and joints. [21]

Beauchamp was also a reader of Ruskin, particular mention being made of The Stones of Venice. Meredith praised John Stuart Mill's On Liberty in a letter to Captain Maxse. [21] As early as 1861, the scientific terms of Darwin's Origin of Species had passed into current speech, or at least into Meredith's reproduction of speech. With a somewhat humorous connotation, Meredith has the Countess de Saldar write in her letter from Italy:

> "I am not at all astonished that Mr. Raikes should have married her maid. It is a case of natural selection." [22]

Speaking in person concerning the effects of the theory of Evolution upon seekers after a living philosophy the author tells us in The Egoist:

> "We drove in a body to Science the other day

[20] Letters of George Meredith, p. 66, Vol. I
[21] Beauchamp's Career, p. 33.
[22] Evan Harrington, p. 571.

> for an antidote...and Science introduced us to our hoary ancestry...and before daybreak, our disease was hanging on to us again with the extension of a tail...We were the same, and animals into the bargain. That is all we got from Science." [23]

Although there is no reference made by the author to Browning in connection with the following bit of philosophy, one of the most original of his ideas is paraphrased. Meredith expresses Browning's well known quotation,

> "A man's reach should exceed his grasp
> Or what's a heav'n for?"

in this manner:

> Man's aim is to culminate, but it is the saddest thing in the world to feel that we have accomplished it. [24]

There is little defense for one who reads Meredith and still fails to feel that he is not au courant of Victorian ideas and trends. The novelist shares the reforming spirit, both social and political. He is contemptuous of the "Barbarians", and sympathetic with the Populace. He reflects the ideas of the most progressive writers of his day, and gives a reading of life not markedly different from that of other Victorian interpreters.

[23] The Egoist, p. 2.
[24] Rhoda Fleming, p. 153.

CHAPTER FIVE.

RELIGIOUS AND DOMESTIC IDEAS.

It is in his religious ideas that Meredith differs most noticeably from the conventional Victorian. Priestley, writing of the characteristic struggles for a firm religious belief which many of the leaders in thought underwent during the era, informs us:

> The great Victorians...are nearly all curiously lopsided. Science, attended by a regiment of prancing 'isms', took the field against Religion, and the thoughtful Victorians had to side with one or the other...or to try to reconcile them. [1]

He offers it as his opinion that Meredith was a pagan in religion and calls attention to the obvious lack of Christian theology in his universe.

Trevelyan defines Meredith's position as regards the struggle between religion and science in this way:

> He is not on the side of religion nor on the side of science if these words are used in the sense that makes them hostile one to the other. But the essence of religious feeling and the scientific idea of evolution are merged into one to form his view of life. In ethics he is equally devoted to liberty and to law. [2]

Meredith himself speaks with a certain levity of man's

[1] Priestley, J. B., George Meredith, p. 64.
[2] Trevelyan, G. M., Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith, p. 104.

appeal to science for a solutiom of the problem of his destiny:

> We drove in a body to Science the other day for an antidote...and Science introduced us to our hoary ancestry...And before daybreak our disease was hanging on to us again with the extension of a tail...We were the same and animals into the bargain. That is all we got from Science. [3]

In further comment upon Meredith's attitude toward evolution, Priestley writes:

> He accepts Evolution, not...a mere mechanical progress or change but, at least when we come to Man, of conscious striving. In this respect, instead of escaping his age, he is its veritable singer. [4]

That is to say that Meredith shares with the other great Victorians the belief that man is the highest product of nature and that his destiny is to attain a perfection never yet realized. For each one it means that the dignity and preciousness of the individual life demand that it shall be lived to the fullest possible measure. Meredith shows through the development of his more serious plots how the individual undergoes a more or less arduous struggle to attain wisdom, poise, tolerance, strength or fortitude. He does not make his characters fight hard to find out the truth about God, but to attain the cardinal virtues. He seems simply to accept the existence of God

[3] The Egoist, p. 2

[4] Priestley, J. B., George Meredith, p. 70.

in nature and in the earth as it is manifest to ordinary observers.

The struggles for religious peace and for a panacea for assailing doubts which marked the lives of Carlyle, George Eliot, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold, had no recorded counterpart in the life of Meredith. None of his characters is made to undergo any profound upheaval in spirit as a result of "honest doubt." In the religion of the organized churches he finds a great many things to satirize, but touching the underlying currents of religion there is very little stirring of the waters evident in his novels.

Bailey quotes Meredith as saying:

> I hope that ultimately we shall take teaching out of the hands of the clergy and that we shall be able to instruct the clergy in the fact that Christianity is a spiritual religion and not one that is to be governed by material conditions. A spiritual God I most perfectly believe in. I have that belief constantly before me...I feel it within me; but a material God that interferes in material affairs I have never seen, and it is, I am sorry to say, for the material God that the clergy seem to be striving. [5]

In spite of this fundamental point of difference between himself and all the clergy, he knows best and satirizes most frequently the clergy of the Anglican Church. However, he saw in the tendency of the English people of his day to turn to the Roman Catholic Church, something of

[5] Bailey, E. J., Novels of George Meredith, p. 163.

a menace. In Dr. Shrapnel's letter to Beauchamp, Meredith has him hit a telling blow at all types of clergymen for their materialism. The clergy of the Established Church are treated with subtlety and sarcasm:

> Rome offers them (i.e. the people) comfort in return for their mites in coin and poor souls! Mites in conscience, many of them...Warn the people of this. Ay, warn the clergy. It is not only the poor that are caught by the ranters. Endeavor to make those accommodating shepherds understand that they stand a chance of losing rich as well as poor'. It should awaken them. The helpless poor and the uneasy rich are alike open to the seduction of Romish priests and intoxicated ranters. [6]

At times Meredith is almost flippant in his remarks concerning organized religion. In a letter (December 1862), he writes to the Reverend Mr. Augustus Jessop, in a characteristic tone:

> The one point he evidently a little chafes at, is the Sunday religious exercise, which you have dared to temper for the poor lambs, and which they must still think severe. I remember at that age how all love of the apostles was belaboured out of me, by three Sunday services of prodigious length and drowsiness. [7]

One of the most amusing situations in Evan Harrington has to do with the Countess de Saldar's religious waverings. She is, of course, thrilled at the thought of going

[6] Beauchamp's Career, p. 326.
[7] Letters of George Meredith, Vol. I, p. 92.

to church at Beckley Court because as a guest of the Jocelyns, she worships in the principal pew under the blazonry of the Jocelyn arms. The Rev. Mr. Parsley is rather a comfort to her, but can not compare with the Catholic, Dr. Herbert Duffin, who ultimately converted her to the Roman Catholic faith. Through this gentleman's anxiety to win her to her faith, he confirms her in her belief that her dear papa was well justified in proclaiming himself a gentleman's offspring, for his conduct was carefully patterned after that of neighboring gentlemen. After her conversion, she travels in Italy, where she becomes more devout in her Catholicism because she feels that the "sweet sovereign Pontiff" is the only religious official of high rank who will gather all into his arms, not excepting tailors.

A religious attitude almost as shallow as that of the Countess is evident in the decision of Everard Romfrey to turn for consolation to the Church.

> So much had the earl been thrown out of his plan for protecting his wife, that he felt helpless, and hinted at the aids and comforts of religion. He had not rejected the official Church and regarding it now as in alliance with great Houses, he considered that its ministers might also be useful to the troubled women of noble families. He offered, if she pleased, to call in the rector to sit with her -- the bishop of the diocese -- if she liked. [8]

[8] Beauchamp's Career, p. 564.

Whenever Meredith draws pictures of curates and rectors, he is a critic of the Anglican clergy. He rarely presents one save in satirical or utterly unattractive manner. His clergymen are often lineal decendants of Jane Austen's Mr. Collins. They usually show stupidity and a belief in their own superiority; they are hypocrites, social climbers, and time servers. The curate of Lobourne is one utterly useless character in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel; as interpreted to us by the Countess de Saldar, the Rev. Mr. Duffin is a slightly comic, yet hypocritical character; Mr. Parsley is best described as seen through the irrepressible Countess' eyes:

> ...the curate, Mr. Parsley, who eats everything and agrees with everything, aided in choking by the tightness of the white neck-cloths the young clergymen of the Established Church wear. He has just as much and no more of the English polish than one ordinarily meets. When he has given me soup or fish, bowed to me over wine and asked a conventional question, he has done with me. I should imagine his opinions to be extremely good, for they are not a multitude; [9]

Dr. Middleton of The Egoist is also a slightly comic figure, a thoroughly Epicurean being, capable of sacrificing his lovely daughter to Sir Willoughby for the gift of the elation caused by the ninety year old Patterne Port. The

[9] Evan Harrington, p. 180.

most unattractive sketches of the clergy are those of the suggestively named pair in One of Our Conquerors, Septimus Barmby and Groseman Buttermore. In the elder Woodseer of The Amazing Marriage, the London Dissenting preacher is portrayed. He is, however, a rather finer type of "ranter" than one would expect in a book by such a critic of clergymen as Meredith.

The novelist was keenly aware of the influence of the church on the people and was equally aware of the unthinking way in which they often accepted their religion. There is truth in his picture of the Countess going to Church to be seen; in that of Major Waring going to see Mrs. Lovell; in the accusation of Dr. Shrapnel that the middle class used religion as a means to coerce the lower class into doing what was desired; in the gesture of the Earl of Fleetwood in turning to a Brotherhood for consolation after his failure to obtain a reconciliation with Corinthia. But in the composite view of all these studies of religion there is no suggestion of the whole truth about the power of religion in Victorian society. Meredith leaves too much out of account the humanitarian spirit and the consecration to work for the betterment of one's fellowmen which animated divines and laymen. He shows no stirrings of the emotions of the people in general by the power of religion. Too frequently even his lowliest characters are either confirmed hypocrites or

cynics. He does, however, affirm an abiding faith in a spiritual God, a high conception of the destiny of man, an essential belief in the goodness of nature and of earth, the mother of man.

Of his pronouncements on the subject of prayer one taken from a late novel is particularly revealing. Matey Weyburn rushed home to his mother's cottage to find her already dead, and in a sentimental scene, he falls on his knees by her bedside in prayer. Meredith writes of this prayer:

> Prayer is power within us to communicate with the desired beyond our thirsts. [10]

This act of communication with the spirit animating all life is Meredith's nearest approach to conventional worship. The spirit with which he chose to commune, he spoke of as a spiritual God. This spirit is not much dwelt upon in the novels. Crees says, in an exposition of Meredith's philosophy:

> But what others call Nature, Meredith more often chooses to call Earth. The difference is significant. It emphasizes his belief that we are sprung from the soil, of the earth earthy, but in some higher sense, that as we come from Earth so we are dissolved again into Earth. [11]

The chief guides to this philosophy discoverable in

10 Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 173.
11 Crees, J. H. E., George Meredith, p. 104.

the novels, are Meredith's interpretations of various lowly characters. There is his acceptance of Robert Eccles in Rhoda Fleming, who in spite of his nearness to "Earth" has something finer within him than have the highly cultured Blancoves. The superiority with which he endows the frank utterly natural Sandra in contrast to the victims of "fine shades and nice feelings" has already been mentioned in Chapter Three. In the novels which deal with the problems of unsanctioned marriage relationships Meredith places the laws of nature and earth constantly higher than those of religion and of country. Man's allegiance is chiefly owing to the natural impulses which the author conceived as wholly or at least dominantly good rather than evil. Victorian morality was not the measuring rod by which he estimated the conduct of his own characters.

Except for the struggles against society in which his characters often found themselves enmeshed and except for the occasional flings taken at the representatives of God on earth, Meredith has no very full revelations concerning that indissolubly united pair of Victorian associates -- Religion and Morality.

DOMESTIC SITUATIONS.

Any mention of Victorian morality is likely to suggest its birthplace and stronghold, the Victorian home.

In an age of glorified domesticity such as was the mid-Victorian age, any novelist who would make the slightest effort to give a truthful reading of society must use the home as the center of his universe. George Eliot sometimes idealized her pictures of home life, even while admitting imperfect harmony, as in the case of the Tulliver household in the Mill on the Floss. The ironic, bitter treatment of home life has been made famous by Samuel Butler's Way of All Flesh, which is a study of the Victorian family, even though it was not published for a number of years after the close of the era. Still more frequently, Victorian novelists treat the absence of a well organized comfortable family life as the source of much pathos, sorrow, and maladjustment. Becky Sharp, David Copperfield, Oliver Twist all lacked the kind of social well-being which a normal, regulated home life secures to a child.

Meredith's love of home was hardly less sentimental than that of his contemporaries. His own life at Box Hill proved how great was his devotion to such a life. In his novels he showed how tremendously important was the influence of home and family upon individual character. But just as a great many of his characters are warped, even in the manifestation of their finest traits, so is his picture of normal or average Victorian home life a bit

warped.

It was true that to a great extent among the classes which form the chief personnel of his novels, the small family had already become the rule. But in the great majority of Victorian homes, the Queen's example of nine offspring was imitated. Meredith's fictional children are almost invariably children of small families. Richard Feverel, Nevil Beauchamp, Willoughby Patterne, Diana and Nesta Victoria were "only" children. Evan Harrington's three sisters were all in some way necessary to the development of a rather complicated plot. Dahlia Fleming was provided with one sister and Corinthia Jane with a brother to supply needs in the plots and contrasts in character. We might easily convict our novelist of failure to give us a true reading of life in this particular. But we should likewise have to convict the best of his fellow artists, for the conscious exercise of their power of selection prevented the most of them from attempting to present the typical Victorian family. We remember Copperfield, the two Sedleys, Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and the three little Pontifexes. The sheer power of numbers would have overwhelmed almost any artist who attempted to give an exact picture of the generously endowed British families. Some characters must of necessity remain figure-heads, where many are attempted, for even the incomparable Jane Austen

found the five Bennet girls three too many for effective characterization.

Not only are Meredith's families small, but they are often placed in nomadic life or in homes lacking in the sympathy and stability which was one of the finest characteristics of Victorian home life. However, Richard Feverel has suffered the loss of his mother by her elopement -- a not improbable occurrence even in the strictly moral atmosphere of mid-century England. The tyranny of Sir Austin's educational system and its consequent effect on Richard's character are a direct outgrowth of this ill adjusted condition of home life.

The weaknesses of a number of Meredith's characters are shown to have a definite relation to an upset of sympathetic, sanely balanced home life. With the death of Mrs. Fleming in Rhoda Fleming the cheerful and wholesome integrating influence passed from the farmer's home, and the cold, hard, narrow and inflexible tyranny of the father became the ruling spirit. Paternal domination is also evident in the formation of the characters of Clotilde of The Tragic Comedians, and of Clara Middleton of The Egoist, the chief difference between the two being that Clotilde had not the spirit and sense to resist, and that Clara had both.

The home life of the Harringtons in Evan Harrington

furnishes all the motives and themes which are developed in the story. The "Great Mel's" snobbery and desire to escape from his own social class are influential upon his children even after his death, and the more ambitious of his offspring are willing to sacrifice the honor of the whole family to their inherited ambition. The poise and common sense of Mrs. Mel acts as a foil to the giddiness of the father, and her good old English determination not to seem something which she is not, acts wholesomely upon all the family except the impossible Countess de Saldar.

Further instances of the effects which Meredith saw clearly resulted from unnatural home environment are found in the egoism of Sir Willoughby Patterne, the "victim" of the adoration of the entire Patterne clan, and in the determined opposition of Beauchamp to the ideas of his Uncle Everard. The grim struggle between the Belthams and Richmond Roy for the devotion of Harry and his checkered childhood life which resulted from it, is another case in point, as are Diana's unstable and motherless childhood, and Nesta Victoria's strange, unsettled, transitory, companionless life. There is in all these cases indirect evidence that although Meredith did not paint a realist's picture of the Victorian family and home, he realized how powerful was the influence of these social factors upon the formation of character.

The fathers or guardians portrayed by Meredith were frequently tyrannical. Sir Austin Feverel, Farmer Fleming, Squire Beltham, Dr. Middleton and Everard Romfrey, were parents whose ideas fitted in admirably with those of the fathers mentioned in Chapter Two -- the representatives on earth of the stern Puritan Father in heaven.

Although the rod does not appear as the right hand assistant of these parents, even when the children were presumably small enough for its use, there is an inflexibility of the will and an exacting demand for obedience in the parental attitude which is as much characteristic of them as of Theobald Pontifex. In addition, they combine an intense interest in the welfare of each child, and are conscious of the great importance and significance of the life of each. There is, however, little of the modern idea of self-direction and guidance by love suggested in any of the parental and filial relations with the possible exception of Nesta Victoria and the Radnors in <u>One of Our Conquerors</u>.

The increasing consciousness of the importance of the children of a family led the Victorian novelists to make some of their most memorable characters children. Meredith's boys, especially those of the early teen age, are particularly well done. This artistry may have been inspired by the association or the memory of his close and loving companionship with his son, Arthur. Richard,

Ripton Thomson, Harry Richmond, and Crossjay Patterne are among his finest studies of childhood and youth. These children were definitely characterized and were yet quite possible and natural children. Richard was like a young and mettlesome colt chafing at restraint; Ripton, just a normal, rather dull, mischief loving boy; Crossjay, a somewhat romanticized youngster who combined the forthright qualities of Ripton and the sensitiveness to honor of Richard; Harry Richmond, a lover of all things romantic, even from babyhood. Meredith's studies of little girls are scarcely more than the merest sketches. Clare is first met as a small, fainting girl afraid of ghosts in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, and Browney, as a young miss of decisive and independent yet attractive personality in Lord Ormont and His Aminta.

Meredith spared no Victorian sentimentality in his manner of describing babies:

> He now followed her leading hand. Lucy whispered, 'You mustn't disturb him,' and with dainty fingers drew off the covering to the little shoulder. One arm of the child was out along the pillow, the small hand open. His baby mouth was pouted full; the dark lashes of his eyes seemed to lie on his plump cheeks. Richard stooped lower down to him, hungering for some movement as a sign that he lived. [12]

Although Meredith's child characters are like the

[12] The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 549.

studies of family life in being partly conventional and partly highly individualistic, it is chiefly in the women of his novels that we see the Victorian heroine as she was not. The fact is that he set up his best known and most admired women characters as a sort of ideal, possessing qualities which he found admirable, but rare. We know, then, frequently what some women were like in the days of Victoria because they possessed traits of character almost wholly unlike those of Meredith's heroines.

By far the greatest part of the critical writings concerning Meredith relates his position upon the traditional concept of womanly conduct. His best critics have often insisted upon the fact that his point of view was progressive. He was essentially occupied with the portrayal of that place in society into which the "lords of creation" had forced womankind, and in the portrayal of the contrasting position of which she would be assured by a wholesome, sane, unsentimental acceptance of her. Bailey writes of Meredith's attitude toward woman:

> Of the many illusions which are constantly hampering mankind in its advance toward full perfection, Meredith judged by all his writings from beginning to end seems to look upon the conventional attitude toward women as the most stubborn. [13]

In specific instances Meredith showed his rather tolerant amusement at the kind of feminine attitudes which were

[13] Bailey, E. J., The Novels of George Meredith, p. 39.

the outgrowth of Victorian "respectability," stamped by the moderns as dull, reactionary, and Puritanical. His blows are on the whole, gentle but well aimed. A dialogue between Sir Willoughby and Clara in The Egoist is one of his most brilliant satirical passages:

> 'Where are we now? Bride is bride and wife is wife and is, in honor, wedded. You cannot be released. We are united. There is no possibility of releasing a wife.'
>
> 'Not if she ran --'
> This was too direct to be histrionically misunderstood...She saw his horror and seeing, shared it, shared just then only by seeing it, which led her to rejoice with the deepest of sighs that some shame was left in her.
>
> 'Ran? ran? ran?' he said as rapidly as he blinked. 'How? where? what idea --?' Close was he upon an explosion that would have sullied his conception of the purity of younger members of the sex hauntingly.
>
> That she, a young lady, maiden, of strictest education should and without his teaching, know that wives ran! know that by running they compelled their husbands to abandon pursuit, surrender possession -- and that she should suggest it of herself as a wife! that she should speak of running! [14]

Even the old ladies, for an example the redoubtable Mrs. Mel, are made to pay tribute to an often ridiculous public opinion or to escape payment only by extraordinary strength of character which flew in the face of convention. Hear the Countess de Saldar concerning Mrs. Mel:

[14] The Egoist, p. 132.

> Mama displeases me in consenting to act as housekeeper to old Grumpus...I do not agree with you in thinking her right in refusing a second marriage. Her age does not shelter her from scandal in your Protestant communities. [15]

In spite of Meredith's ability to see the humor of the Victorian lady's position and to see the sham and sentimentality in the combination of idol and slave which the average Victorian gentleman was supposed to worship, but actually tyrannized over, he was almost never ultra modern and often not at all modern in his characterization of femininity. Some of his least conventional and most admirable women had their Victorian traits. But the chief victims of his satiric Muse were those ladies who had no traits which were nobler than the narrowest, least sincere of the Victorian virtues.

The first and simplest of Meredith's heroines, Lucy Desborough, was a conventionally sweet, innocent and credulous young miss moved only by a passionate and eternal devotion to her young lover. She was swerved from this devotion by nothing whatsoever -- neither cruelty, nor neglect, nor injustice. Her watchwords were ever fidelity and love. She had a fine sort of courage, however, which sometimes fails to appear in the character of a heroine of this soft, yielding, obedient and dependent type. Our author was consistently Victorian enough in

[15] Evan Harrington, p. 572.

the case of Lucy to have her yield appropriately to martyrdom, overcome by the great burden of her sorrows.

Rose Jocelyn of Evan Harrington belongs to the category of heroines described as characteristically Victorian by Mrs. Elizabeth Drew, who writes of them:

> But they all fall in love, have to pass through suffering and sacrifice and win final happiness by patience and devotion to principle. [16]

The ladies Isabel and Elinor Patterne, aunts of Sir Willoughby, and the Duvidney ladies, aunts of Victor Radnor, were preserved as carefully from any taint of feminism as if they had lived on another planet. The knitting and embroidery done by the former pair, and the tender care and expensive perfume lavished upon a lap dog by the latter are indicative of the circumscribed interests of the maiden ladies of the era. The fact that not even in the privacy of their own boudoir, in the darkness, could the Duvidney sisters bring themselves to a frank discussion of their dog's necessary habits, and of their nephew's unnecessary "mistake" is the sort of fact that the present day attributes to the modesty peculiar to "respectable" Victorian ladies.

Clare Forey of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel is first met as a small, fainting girl. She is later made to suf-

[16] Drew, E., The Modern Novel, p. 107.

fer for a great love in silence, to obey unquestioningly her mother's command to marry a repulsive husband and finally to die of disappointment and a broken heart, raising a sort of remorse in Richard's heart.

Although Meredith held a liberal ideal for feminine freedom, he was not a believer in the magic of the ballot. In spite of his obvious admiration of Diana, and her taste for intellectual aphorisms and politics, he did not fully liberate even her from his own Victorian estimate that women, no matter how intelligent and progressive, act rather on feeling and impulse than upon reasonable, rationalized bases.

In his gospel on the problems arising out of unhappy married life and the social stigma upon divorce and unsanctioned union, he never advocates the freeing of society from all restrictions. In Nataly Radnor, who is, I think, one of the finest of all his characters, he shows clearly what a price society exacts of a finely sensitive soul torn between the courage to love without social sanction and the fear of the consequences of her own action when exposed to the eyes of the world. As a character she enlists our sympathy, and Mrs. Burman Radnor, who refuses to divorce Victor, our distaste, but Meredith is not committed to any advocacy that society should feel differently about Victor and Nataly. One needs no clearer ex-

position of the extreme horror felt by "refined" society toward the erring lover in Victorian days than the study of the Radnor family and its contacts. It is significant to remember that Meredith was drawing this fine character during the same period when Sir Arthur Wing Pinero could not find it in his experience to justify the rescue of Paula in The Second Mrs. Tanqueray. These fin de siecle writers had not escaped the Victorian social order, and in spite of all Priestley says concerning Meredith's modern point of view, he concedes this:

> He always surveys the world and Woman in that world from a strictly masculine angle. Never in his heart does he depart from the fiew that the end of Woman is mating and the goal he always sets her is a satisfying personal relationship. [17]

Meredith himself has a number of pointed and amusing things to say concerning the position of women. Clara Middleton, finding herself enveloped in the toils of an elaborate, even though unwritten code of behavior for ladies, debates with herself how best to escape marriage with Sir Willoughby:

> She could not declare that she doubted his truthfulness...a sullen fit, tears, pretext of a mood were denied her now by the rigor of those laws of decency which are a garment to ladies of pure breeding. [18]

The functions of the Victorian wife as Meredith saw

[17] Priestley, J. B., George Meredith, p. 137.
[18] The Egoist, p. 392.

them through the eyes of the ordinary husband are perhaps nowhere in his writings set forth so succintly as in this excerpt, likewise from The Egoist:

> A tried steadfast woman is the one jewel of the sex. She points to her husband like the sunflower; her love illuminates him; she lives in him, for him; she testifies to his worth; she drags the world to his feet; she leads the chorus of his praises; she justifies him in his own esteem. Surely there is not on earth such beauty. [19]

In Beauchamp's Career, Cecelia Halklett, who is sympathetic and intelligent, is yet bound by the political traditions of her father simply because they were his, and because she, a daughter, must be obedient in all things. In a soliloquy, this revelation concerning her conduct toward Nevil is made:

> Nor was it to be acknowledged even to herself that she so greatly desired to see him and advise him. Because she was one of the artificial creatures called women who dare not be spontaneous -- who if they would be admirable in the world's eye must remain fixed on shelves like other marketable objects -- avoiding motion to avoid shattering or tarnishing. [20]

In a less ironic vein, Meredith tells how the majority of women react toward a sister who finds this passivity and simulated ignorance intolerable. The Countess de Saldar is in question:

[19] Ibid., p. 341
[20] Beauchamp's Career, p. 366.

> The women smiled vacantly and had a common thought that it was ill bred of her to hold forth in that way at table, and unfeminine of any woman to speak continuously anywhere. [21]

Meredith's heroes frequently speak in a disparaging manner of women's intellect, advising them not to judge things out of their sphere, and placing a contemptuous estimate upon their ideas. The proof of a generally accepted belief of feminine inferiority is the lack of protest with which even the women themselves accepted the rebuffs.

Occasionally the author seems to speak in person in a manner utterly conventional, especially concerning ideals of purity and sentimentality. He says, for example, almost lyrically of Rose Jocelyn:

> Remember, however, that a kiss separates them; and how many millions of leagues that counts for in love in a pure girl's thought, I leave you to guess. [22]

Of the same fine girl he writes with tender feeling:

> The tears streamed down her cheeks, and in her lovely humility, he saw the baseness of that pride of his which had hitherto held him up. [23]

21 Evan Harrington, p. 281.
22 Evan Harrington, p. 557.
23 Ibid., p. 565.

An apparently complete surrender to the belief that woman has a definite sphere is often indicated. For an example, the idea advanced by Harriet that women excel only in a spiritual, non-intellectual contest:

> 'You have no chance with men there, Louisa?
> 'My Harriet complains of female weakness'.'
> 'Yes. We are strong in our own element, Louisa. But don't be tempted out of it.' [24]

Inasmuch as the majority of traits in Meredith's manner of approach to the study of womankind is undoubtedly modern, these traits have received emphasis and have been noted almost to the exclusion of his more conventional studies. There are enough of the latter, however, to prove that he stood upon that important question not very far away from his contemporaries. His deep silence upon the tragedy of his own marriage, his insistence that men should <u>give</u> what women presumably had not the power to attain, his complete belief that

> "The woman's cause is man's; they rise or sink Together,"

and his recognition that the best conceivable career of womankind did not leave man out of it at all, are certainly conventional enough. His lifelong acknowledgment that

[24] <u>Evan Harrington</u>, p. 541

there was a "woman problem", and that woman's true position in society was neither that of vassal nor idol was a point of view common enough among Victorian thinkers and writers.

CHAPTER SIX.

CONCLUSION.

A painter who tried to paint, in a series of murals or canvasses, the panorama of Victorian life as Meredith alone revealed it, might often find himself at a loss for details of color, shape or style. But as his knowledge and imagination must aid him in supplying detail, so must the knowledge and imagination of the appreciative reader supply for him the clear, complete images of sights, sounds and scenes which the novelist leaves shadowy, or suggests with but a few vivid words.

On the other hand, a realistic background is often carefully and elaborately worked out by the author, so that characters move about in an environment nearly as definite as that of one's neighbors. Meredith draws a real, living English background, especially that part of it representing the countryside and the country estate. And small wonder it is, for he knew and loved Hampshire and Surrey, altho' he did not always choose to describe their landscape as exactly as Hardy has described that of the Wessex country. Meredith also knew the typical seaport town, for he was born at Portsmouth, and the "sou'wester" was familiar throughout his youth. When he ventured to describe scenes about London, his studies

are more vague, although the essential quality of the London street is often made to emerge from his descriptions with remarkable vividness. The England of his day, however, was rich in Victorian atmosphere, both in provincial county and in cosmopolitan city. One who recorded the idyllic beauty of the country estate recorded the dominant beauty of English background.

In addition to the occasional word paintings which reveal the physical aspects of Victorian England in a rare degree, there is much in Meredith which irrevocably "dates" him. Although he was not in his art a devotee of a restraining consistency, and there is admittedly much within his pages which bears little relation to the social order then current, and which gives a queer, somewhat distorted picture of English society, yet there is much unmistakable evidence that he depicted the social life of England of his day with commendable fidelity.

From first to last he portrays genuine English sports, English social gatherings, and English home and family life as it existed upon his own plane. His exposition of the relations of social classes in nineteenth century England is superb. He is alert to the problems of hypocritical Puritan discipline, of middle class materialism, of upper class decadence and lack of leader-

ship, and of the false unendurable position of the majority of women. He offers significant observations on contemporary art, music, entertainment, and reading. On the other hand, his treatment of the religious life of the populace lacks the touch of reality. He is less earnest and less zealous about the "struggle" of religion and science than any good Victorian could conceivably be.

Nevertheless, he stands side by side with many "good Victorians" in their characteristic beliefs, and shares with them opinions often as like as two drops of water. The remarkable intricacy with which literary influences are woven and interwoven leaves us doubtful as to the indebtedness of any first rate author to another, and especially to a contemporary. We are rather safe in presuming that a number of nineteenth century authors let down their buckets where they were and of necessity drew up out of the pool of Victorian activity, many similar ideas and attitudes. Meredith is, therefore, also "dated" as a contemporary of the great Victorians by virtue of many fundamental beliefs he shares with them, by the seriousness of his efforts to understand life, by his power of creating strong, individualistic characters -- which he frequently shows as "egoists" -- by his interest in a broader liberalism in politics and society. Like Dickens, and Arnold, and Ruskin, and Carlyle, he felt the

urge of the reforming spirit which was abroad in the country. Even the interests and influences somewhat peculiar to him -- the strong stamp of German thought on his mind and character, and his preoccupation with the feminist question are suggestive of the age and its cultural life, and of its pressing problems. Only his natural humor prevented his zeal for reforming manners from being at least as characteristic of him as is his concept of Comedy.

Our knowledge of Victorian society gleaned from the writings of Meredith's contemporaries is most incomplete if we do not know at least a few of Dickens' "single trait" comic characters, Thackeray's Snobs, Matthew Arnold's Philistines and Tennyson's rebellious women. We are further prepared to understand Meredith, if we have, in addition to this, the knowledge of Browning's philosophy of happiness lying in imperfection or of Darwin's theory of natural selection. In Meredith we find reflections of them all, and we know unmistakably that even while he contributed prophetic and visionary "readings of life" in his novels, he kept his stride well timed to that of his great contemporaries. He did not outrun them, as many critics would have us believe.

From the internal evidence offered by the novels themselves, we venture to "date" our author. No one

could mistake them -- sophisticated, analytical products that they are -- for works of the eighteenth century which saw the rise of the novel. They have escaped too completely from plot into the realm of characterization, and have shuffled off the simple, though rambling stories of the early novels for an elaborate, still rambling analysis of mental processes. There are scarcely more than a few tragic or nearly tragic incidents in the most complicated of them. On the other hand, the novels could scarcely be of any twentieth century genre, for they are "respectable" even as the author laughs at "respectability". He treats moral problems with a fine dignity and restraint, admitting no prurience. His works are often sentimental even while he conducts an open and studied warfare against sentimentality. He yields occasionally to the impulse to insert a harrowing death-bed scene, idealizes young love, and draws character after character with no spark of human naughtiness. His books are conventional, even as he asks a pointed question concerning the justice and logic of conventions.

Throughout our search for traits which vindicate our author of the critical charge that he is not of his own time nor place, we have attempted always to apply but one touchstone: What should we know of mid-nineteenth century England if all available social histories and liter-

ary works except those of George Meredith were destroyed?

What a wealth of knowledge he does leave to us! Read his pages carefully and know the truth about social organization, and a part of the vastly complicated truth about social environment. Know the aims of that reforming spirit which was, after all, the animating force of the Victorians. Know adequately what problems concerning woman and the family were most difficult of solution. Know political trends from the points of view of both the idealist and of his opponents. Know many of the most significant things thought and said by Meredith's leading contemporary litterateurs.

Find in Meredith the devotion to progress that was Victorian; the reticence that was Victorian; frequently the sentimentality that was Victorian; the zeal for reforming society that was Victorian, and everywhere in his pages the unmistakable surge of rich, varied and busy life, set down in a spirit of romantic realism, likewise Victorian.

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1. This is a working bibliography. It does not claim to be exhaustive.

2. Cf. Diana of the Crossways and The Egoist.

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